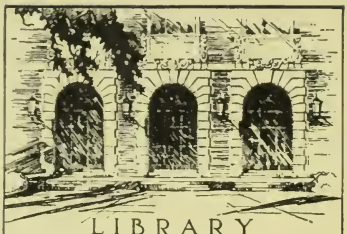
A CHILD WIDOW



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A CHILD WIDOW.

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A CHILD WIDOW

A Novel

By MRS. F. H. WILLIAMSON
AUTHOR OF 'IN WHITE AND GOLD,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.

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1891

'The presence of her is young sun-rise
That gladdeneth, and in wondrous wise
Glorifieth the earth and skies.

* * * * * * *

The memory of her is mellow light
In darkness, mingling something bright
With all things; like a summer night.'

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A CHILD WIDOW

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER REPENTANCE—PEACE.

Sir Peter Cairne's strong resolution, conquering the weakness of his frame, carried him through the fatigue of making his will and other last arrangements. When there was no further need of his energies they slackened, and the fire that had shone in his eyes faded; the animosity which had been its fuel no longer causing it to break out again and again into angry flames. Confident that the course he had taken would provide

against every contingency that might arise, he was now able to consider the circumstances dispassionately and at leisure ; just as we can view with less repulsion and alarm the cobra in an Indian juggler's basket knowing its fangs have been extracted.

Sir Peter now felt himself to be fully avenged, yet a conflicting feeling of compunction mingled with his almost savage satisfaction. He grew half alarmed at the importance of his act, but was too weak for clear, sustained thought.

All his impressions were wavering and indistinct ; the slightest stir or sound changed their current and complexion. Like bubbles they floated hither and thither in the air, directed by a breath, a wave of heat ; when they touched anything more solid than themselves they broke and dispersed with not even a spray of moisture to mark where they had drifted.

When Nancy, moved by a spasmodic idea of duty, came in, pale and red-eyed, to sit beside him, he forgot his rancour altogether in a benevolent concern for her future, exerting himself to utter some broken phrases of advice, to which she listened meekly, feeling that her own identity was gone, and with it independence ; that she could never again be anything but a pale reflex of other people's wishes and intentions. A sense of helplessness over-weighted her natural buoyancy ; she staggered under it and trembled with a fear utterly foreign to her nature. She had left the beaten track, which, however unattractive, had at least been safe, and she had wandered into strange regions without a guide or escort, and now she must wait until someone came to lead her out of the labyrinth in which she was lost. She herself had done enough—too much.

So she smiled wanly at Sir Peter, and tried

to thank him for the goodness which, she felt miserably persuaded, might be as disastrous to her happiness as that gift of turning all he touched to gold was to King Midas. Was she, too, to pine away in midst of all her grandeur and starve in spite of plenty? she asked herself with a painful indrawn breath. The tears started to her eyes, she tried to brush them away without their being seen; but she did not succeed in her endeavour. Sir Peter said nothing. The situation, only dimly divined, was too complex for him to grasp with his failing faculties; but a new wistfulness came into his gaze as he stroked her hand tenderly from time to time, as though with intent to soothe, now he had no longer power to assist, now that all things were passing from him, slowly, painlessly, yet with cruel certainty of loss.

Long after she had left him he still looked mournful and perplexed.

The punishment he had meted out, if extreme, was not the outcome of unmerited misfortune, but the result of a deliberate disobedience to his will; yet when he remembered that it was life-long and irremediable his spirit quailed. He was afraid to consider what it was that he had done.

The machinery he had set in motion with his own hand was more powerful for good or evil than he had supposed. Its working was more intricate, nor could he guess what would be its ultimate production. The whirring of wheels within wheels confused him. All around him was growing shadowy and unreal, and exaggerated in size; the buzzing of a solitary house-fly when sometimes it deserted the window-pane and came near to his bed boomed like distant thunder in his ears. All objects grew larger and very wearisome to his sight; he himself felt pitiably small, an unconsidered atom in a Titanic world. It was

only—or so it seemed—by the last remnant of his shattered strength that he resisted being crushed by his surroundings, or blown away like thistledown before the wind.

Thus the long afternoon wore away. The gloom deepened, and not a sound came from outside but an occasional footfall hurrying past, the wind whistling among the bare branches of trees in the deserted square, or from farther away the breaking of the sea against the shore, that eternal rising and falling which seems to mock at Death and all the small changes of our lives. Very solemn grew the stillness. Sir Peter lying alone—save for the quiet watcher in an adjoining room, so quiet as to be easily forgotten—lost sight of the present, and only dwelt upon the past, the past he had outlived, but which had had its sweetnesses, never fully appreciated nor acknowledged, as well as sorrows borne bravely with a

pride that refused sympathy and disdained aid.

Possessing his share of that egotism which sees only one 'I' in the universe, round which the tributary lights of 'they' and 'you' and 'he' and 'she' revolve and twinkle admiration, Sir Peter had carried the selfishness of bachelordom even into his married life, and had allowed it to shadow his love as it had eclipsed every friendship he had ever made. Never for a moment did he forget his own personality, and he judged all actions as they stood in relation to himself. Capable of generous acts that were never spoilt by the manner of their execution, he would only do a kindness unasked, and had always carefully chosen his associates from the ranks of those who were above suspicion of interestedness ; while, to do him justice, he was as little likely to solicit favours from these, as to grant favours to less fortunate persons. It was his vanity

that was most hurt by an application for help. A petition of such sort marred the pleasant intercourse of years, suggesting as it did to his jaundiced mind the doubt whether it had not always been in contemplation, and the true cause of what he had unsuspiciously enjoyed.

How many friends he had lost so, parted from in freely expressed scorn, which in some cases had been as freely returned; and now more tender memories assailed him of women whose trust he had disappointed, being himself so destitute of faith.

Since his wife's fortune had augmented his own, this evil in his nature had flourished and grown apace. Only now he asked himself was it possible that he had set exaggerated value on his wealth, and that others had been laughing at him the while because wheat and tares had been rooted up without discernment, and because in ridding himself of an evil

he had deprived himself also of the truest good?

As the pervading silence reached a culminating point, it seemed as if its very completeness gave birth to strange sounds that were not of earth, though he still lingered there, and out of the deep darkness were evolved visions distinctly seen, yet incompatible with light.

Dream voices and dream faces thronged the air—all at different times component portions of his life, loved by him or neglected. Some were dead, others as remorselessly separated from his destiny by chance or their own desire; and all to his distraught imagination appeared to reproach him or condemn, although no fact detached itself from the nebulous confusion to bring a clear accusation against him.

The visions were ephemeral and fleeting, but presently where all was ghostlike one

spirit-form grew less ethereal, clothing itself in the fair proportions of his dead wife—Leslie's mother.

Majestic, noble, a halo—was it of martyrdom?—encircling her forehead as a crown, she advanced towards him with the queenly air he so well remembered, not menacingly nor even with the chilling sense of adverse judgment; yet he closed his eyes to shut out her presence, fearing to meet her gaze. Had he not robbed her son of what was rightly his due?

Lying there, overcome suddenly with shame, he became sensible by degrees to a reassuring influence, while the atmosphere became charged with wonderful compassion—unfailing tenderness that only the purest sympathy could foster and bring to such perfection. There was a moving of hands above his brow, a gentle touching of his hair, the faint perception of a breath as sweet and cold

as perfumed snow. Even through his closed eyelids he could see her now as she bent over him, and, as she had so often done in life, tried to transfer the blame from him to herself.

Her kindly glance beamed comfort and encouragement; her mouth, so sorrowfully down-drooped, spoke only of reparation for which it was not yet too late.

'It is I who sacrificed my son in a vain effort to reinstate myself in your affection, where for so short a time I reigned supreme. I erred for your dear sake. See you to it. Atone! I adjure you by my love—the love ever constant, though you doubted and denied it.'

The words were conveyed by mysterious bright jets of light, that faded even as they shaped themselves, appealing only to the eye, or at least to no past experience of sound; yet her well-known accents were not needed to

assure him that his wife had spoken to him from the grave, being endowed with this transient power to right the cruel wrong she had committed.

Sir Peter, passing one trembling hand across his brow, tried to arouse himself from dreaming and to think clearly.

Colonel Fayrer's words came back to him, 'It was left to you in trust,' and he asked himself whether he had not indeed betrayed the confidence reposed in him. His wife had loved him fervently—he felt that now; but he had repaid her devotion by beggaring her son—the being who next to himself was nearest to her heart.

And who was enriched at his expense?

A girl who had only unwillingly consented to receive what he bequeathed; who already, if what was written on her countenance could be credited, regretted her concession.

He laughed aloud—an angry, bitter laugh

that banished all that was phantasmal, and brought Jaynes to his bedside.

Sir Peter stared at him, dazed and doubtful. Had he been asleep, or had his spirit come into anticipatory contact with other spirits from that unexplored territory into which he would so shortly be ushered, never to emerge? However it had come, the experience had left him with the feeling that it was not too late to atone even now, although his fluctuating strength tempted him to let everything remain as it was, while he, too, floated with the strong tide that was bearing him along, slowly, surely, to eternity's limitless shore.

For the first time perhaps in his life, Sir Peter subdued a selfish desire, and, stimulated by the memory of eyes that so lately had looked into his in faith surviving where all else had perished, asked feebly for a pencil and paper.

With difficulty he traced some words when these were brought to him—then let the open sheet flutter down on the table.

'For Miss Nancy—Lady Cairne,' he whispered, and Jaynes signifying comprehension of his wish, he composed himself once more upon his pillow, vaguely expectant that the vision of his wife would return now he had carried out her behest.

Whither she led he would follow; she should be his beacon-light, his religion, as she had always been his love. And a fancy that had in it no intentional irreverence sank as a germ of consolation into his soul, quickly blossoming and fructifying, so that his body —a moment ago shivering and nerveless—was suddenly thrilled through and through with the lovely warmth of summer, his soul being wrapt in an ecstasy of hope.

And if, in that mysterious vista down which he gazed with filmy eyes, there was nothing

he could claim with happy certainty as his due, he almost felt as if there were nothing whose advent he need fear. He had acted justly towards his neighbours; he had endeavoured in all things so to live that publicity was a thing to be courted, and not dreaded. Yet it was not to any sense of self-satisfaction that he owed the beneficent calm which stole over him like the influence of an anæsthetic.

Not on account of his own somewhat Pharisaical rectitude—which, subjected to such a crucial test, proved to be a flimsy garment thrown about him by conventionality rather than a genuinely honest purpose to live in accordance with those laws of man which have close resemblance to the laws of God—but because of his wife's purity, her goodness, and her constant prayers, he should be saved.

Not the highest creed, yet no bad one; and he rested in it with a childlike confidence that

was pathetic by contrast with the belief in himself—his own rigid honesty, his unshaken virtue—which had characterized him through life.

His tired eyelids drooped over the world-weary eyes, and repose insensibly deepened into sleep, which, in its turn, was merged in the great stillness of death.

Jaynes, whose perceptions were quickened by keen curiosity, as well as that concern which even the most callous must feel when one they have known well is removed beyond the reach of pain or pleasure, knew that the end was very near ; and after a few ineffectual efforts to administer stimulants and nourishment, left Sir Peter in peace—listening to the laboured breathing until in one low, fluttering sigh it altogether ceased.

Gently he drew down the wrinkled eyelids then, and composed the thin hands into the meekly reverential attitude prescribed for the

dead, whether they have or have not lived a life in harmony with it.

A veil has fallen over the Past that none may lift; the Future is still more effectually concealed; he himself is sacred with a sanctity we cannot apprehend, and only obscurely feel. Those who have judged most harshly judge no more; the evil in him is forgotten, or at least glossed over with the reflection that the man, however offending, has now passed into a Presence so awful that earthly criticism and condemnation are alike puerile and unavailing.

The dignity of the dead who shall disturb? Into the secrets of the emancipated soul none may pry, seeing that it has returned to its Maker; sullied more or less, yet winged thither with a last hope in the Infinite Mercy that is equivalent to the most impassioned prayer.

Such solemn silence fell upon the dimly-

lighted room that even Jaynes was impressed, and only by an effort recovered his ordinary composure, turning the gas up to its full height, and adopting his most matter-of-fact air to rid himself of the unwelcome feeling.

A glance at the clock had told him it was past midnight, and he hoped there was much to do before the daylight broke; while he had no intention of allowing any nonsensical scruples to interfere with his plans.

A sacrilegious hand first dexterously insinuated itself beneath the pillow and abstracted a well-filled purse, which was considerably lightened of its burden before it was as quietly replaced. Then there were boxes to be ransacked, bundles of papers to be overhauled on the chance of discovering a stray bank-note, or documents that might prove more valuable still; so that two hours elapsed before Jaynes desisted from his toil, well satisfied with what he had achieved.

The robbery was entirely without risk, for there were no near relatives or friends who could swear to the dead man's possessions; and no others would conceive any suspicion so long as a certain amount of money and valuables was left untouched.

The valet was too clever to make a clean sweep of everything—too experienced, in fact—preferring to thieve with moderation, if only thus he could escape detection. Stealthily he moved about, his evil expression rendered the more repulsive by contrast with the posthumous dignity of his dead master, who lay there happily unconscious of the desecration of his treasures; and last of all he came to the note on which Sir Peter had expended his failing energies.

Carelessly he read it through, his habitual smile flickering uncertainly at first, then gradually settling down into a look of

determined malice as, folding the paper up carefully, he placed it in his pocket.

'I remember,' he said slowly, speaking every word aloud and with deliberate emphasis—'I remember, Mr. Leslie Wolffe, as how you once said everything really valuable becomes more valuable by keeping. We'll just see what a month or so will do for this.'

Then, having apparently relieved himself by this outspoken burst of enmity, he applied himself to putting away his ill-gotten gains where they would not be easily discovered were anyone stimulated to search.

When everything was arranged to his satisfaction, he went out on to the landing to ascertain whether anyone was about to whom he might communicate, with an air of spontaneity, his news; then noiselessly descended, feeling, in spite of his cold-bloodedness, that he should rest better the farther he was away

from the master he had robbed. But in the basement, as well as in the artist's room, all lights were out ; only at the top of the house was one small glimmer, where Nancy lay awake and tearless, longing for the day.

By the lingering warmth of the dull embers in the kitchen grate Jaynes ensconced himself comfortably in an easy-chair, and slept that sleep which is erroneously supposed to be monopolized by the just, until with the first faint signs of dawn the charwoman came in from the adjoining room, and, her animosity quenched for the moment by a premonitory fear, aroused him.

CHAPTER XV.

COMING HOME.

When Millicent drove up to the door the following day she found Mrs. Scarrot on the steps looking anxiously for her arrival; and an involuntary upward glance at the darkened windows prepared her for part of what she had to hear.

'Sir Peter?' she said sharply as she jumped out.

'He's dead, Miss Millicent; but stranger things than that have happened since you left us. Come in out of the street, and I'll tell you all about it.'

Then, as she hurried the luggage in and

took the money out to pay the cab, Nancy came flying down the stairs and threw herself into her sister's arms, almost strangling her in a close embrace.

'Milly darling, why did you leave us; couldn't you guess everything would go wrong? How can I tell you all? Milly, Milly, I am so glad you are here,' she said, sobbing.

Releasing herself gently, and striving hard for composure, Millicent drew her downstairs to their small sitting-room, soothing her with tender words as they went, and never relaxing the warm reassuring hand-clasp which seemed to Nancy, as she clung desperately to it, a source of strength.

Millicent, pale and trembling, yet forcing an heroic smile, seated herself in her own particular chair; and Nancy, throwing herself down beside her, blurted out the whole story, giving herself no benefit of extenuating cir-

cumstances in her haste, and dwelling most, as it seemed to her hearer, on Wolffe's natural indignation.

'Do you mean to say that you let Sir Peter leave you the money that ought to have belonged to him ?' was her first question.

'Don't you understand ? I wanted to save it from going out of his reach altogether. I wanted to give it back to him.'

'And he will not take it ?'

'I have not asked him yet. Everything I have done has been so terribly wrong,' said poor Nancy ; 'I thought it best to wait for you.'

'It does not seem as if I had been very wise myself,' sighed Millicent, looking back to the day when she had deliberately, and against all advice, put up that big board with its ten large letters, which had drawn upon them all these untoward events. If she had only withheld her hand then, nothing of this could

have happened; and in the first shock of horrified surprise the utter destitution which might have ensued appeared quite a pleasant alternative.

'Do you think he will ever forgive me? I never thought how it would horrify him to know I was bearing his dead mother's name, standing in her place,' was whispered timidly.

Millicent started. It was only now she realized that this child with the dishevelled hair and piteously quivering mouth was actually Lady Cairne, mistress of herself and a considerable fortune. The notion was incongruous and absurd; she could not rid herself of the idea that a close investigation of the facts would prove them to be labouring under a wrong impression, or at least that what had occurred was a mistake which might be rectified.

'Has Mr. Skene been here?' she asked, her

thoughts reverting to their only friend and counsellor.

'He came once; I did not see him.'

'We must send for him, and find out what can be done.'

The answers to a few more questions informed her that Colonel Fayrer, in the absence of any near relative, had taken upon himself to make arrangements for Sir Peter's funeral; that he was in the house then, and had wished to see Millicent so soon as she arrived, and had leisure to discuss with him what was to be done.

'I had better go now,' said Millicent, rising; 'and, Nancy, you must not fret about it. It can't be so bad as it seems.'

She stooped and kissed her as she spoke—her kiss conveyed courage as well as consolation, and caused Nancy, whose nature was not easily attuned to sorrow, to look up with a comical little smile.

'After all, it's not such a terrible misfortune to have riches thrust upon one. Some would have sufficient philosophy to resign themselves to the blow; and under other circumstances I might bear it like a heroine too. It is only that I am robbing someone else — robbing him.' Then, relapsing into despair, she added: 'Will you tell him if you see him, Millicent?'

'You shall tell him everything yourself when the right time comes. Be patient a little while, until we see exactly how matters stand.' With assumed cheerfulness, very far from her real feeling, Millicent then went away, sending Mrs. Scarrot in advance to announce her coming to Colonel Fayrer.

She found him in Sir Peter's sitting-room with a pile of papers before him, mostly unpaid or receipted bills he was filing and putting into proper order. This was the first time she had seen him, and she was very

favourably impressed with his manner and appearance, as he greeted her with a pleasant smile which somehow persuaded her without speech that nothing was so dismal as she had imagined, nothing beyond hope of improvement. Perhaps he was one of the few men who would have seen anything to deplore in the succession to a large fortune, even when by right it belonged to another; and Millicent liked him because he entered into her feelings, never doubting she was sincere in her wish that the money should go to the lawful heir. He also won her heart by the way he spoke of Nancy; and he seemed hopeful that her motive in accepting the legacy might be understood by Sir Peter Cairne's stepson and a compromise effected.

Altogether, Millicent was cheered by the interview, and could smile at Mrs. Scarrot's tearful excitement when they met afterwards on the staircase.

'I can't tell you how it happened. I don't know what *did* happen. It's all confused and topsy-turvy in my head. You should never have left us, Miss Millicent. We weren't fit to be left; only I'm glad Miss Nancy's milady now. They can't take that away from her, can they? nor the money?'

'We don't know yet, Mrs. Scarrot. After the funeral we shall see the will and hear more about it.'

The charwoman leant forward and caught her arm, gripping it harder than she knew in her earnestness.

'Get it over as quick as you can. The sooner they are all out of the house the better.'

'You're afraid,' began Millicent, thinking of the dead man upstairs, who in life had always been urbane and courteous, and who in dying had endeavoured to befriend them.

'No; it's not the corpse I'm thinking of.

I've seen too many of them. It's the living I'm dreading. That man Jaynes—while he is in the house I can settle down to nothing. I can't sleep, and when I do drop off I dream of him, and don't know whether I wasn't awake, after all. Heaven preserve us! there he is!'

The valet, clad in an irreproachable black costume, which harmonized with his funereal aspect, was close beside her—had probably heard her last words; for he smiled as he went by, and the charwoman's distraught imagination detected something menacing in his glance. She was visibly unhinged, and nothing intelligible could be elicited from her afterwards.

'I know nothing against him—nothing at all. This business has upset me. I'm not myself. I'm bothered altogether. You must get someone else, Miss Millicent, who'll do better for you. I'm past work; I'm too old,

too foolish, too *frightened*,' she concluded, with a catching of her breath; and, as soon as she could, escaped to her stronghold—the kitchen—where there was less chance of encountering her *bête-noire*.

'It is very jumpy,' said Nancy, when she heard of it. 'I wish we were away from it all.'

'We shall be soon. I have sold the lease of the house and all the furniture; and in any case you would not be staying here.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean you will be a rich woman probably, and can go where you please.'

Sudden silence. The gravity in Nancy's sweet gray eyes deepened into absolute gloom. She sighed twice or thrice before she said slowly:

'It was a more serious business letting lodgings than we thought. Confess, Milly, that for once I was right.'

'It was impossible to see into the future,' Milly answered quietly, forbearing to remind her sister that for what had occurred her own wild conduct on a certain windy afternoon had been partly responsible, and that in this last complication she was also much to blame.

Millicent never said quite so much as she thought, relying on deeds rather than words.

Now that she had returned, the confusion and excitement that had reigned gradually disappeared, and everything fell into its customary routine.

Dr. Porter, who had been Sir Peter Cairne's medical adviser, and who had always had a mild admiration for her, especially noticed this, with admiration which increased when he saw how quietly everything was arranged, and *well* arranged, under her administration; perhaps he was piqued, too, that she showed neither gratitude for his help nor anger

because it had not been more justly bestowed.

She scarcely ever addressed him. She only answered his questions, when he made a pretext to call, with a quiet indifference that spurred him on to new endeavours to rouse her interest—but all of these failed.

To no one but Mark Skene did she say anything of what she thought; but to him she unburdened her heart when he came in the following day in response to her summons. She had a long talk with him alone, which was satisfactory in so far as it was a relief, since he would not agree with her as to Nancy's legacy being anything but a wonderful windfall; while for Wolffe, whom he had only seen that afternoon on the pier, and had even then, with no sufficient cause, disliked, he had no pity.

'A fellow who wants to step into dead

men's shoes deserves to be disappointed,' he declared.

'It was his mother's money, and his by right, I understand.'

'You may depend upon it, there was some good reason for its not being left to him direct. Bohemia is a pleasant country, doubtless, but it is not an edifying place of residence, or likely to elevate the standard of a man's morality. This man certainly could not have been a fit person for you to know. It is a thousand pities he was ever received under your roof.'

He spoke with the uncompromising narrow-mindedness of a man who, even in his faults and follies, had never wandered by one hair's breadth from the beaten track, who was pleasantly conscious that his manners and customs, like his coats and hats, bore the stamp of the latest fashion, and who, having no wish to possess a

dangerous originality, had no sympathy whatever with the irresponsibilities of genius.

Millicent was jarred by his speech. If she, with youth's quick intolerance, was sometimes too prone to harsh judgment, she was generous as well, and had never condemned anyone without a hearing. Mark Skene's accusation must be entirely without basis, for the two men had never met.

'You are not doing him justice. If you ever know him well I think you would feel it would be impossible to distrust him to that extent. He is essentially gentlemanly and nice, and his face' — she paused a moment, during which there rose before her a vivid photographic remembrance of Leslie Wolffe's bright blue eyes, full of mirth, not always free from wicked intent, yet with an honest purpose it was impossible to mistake, and a frank tenderness that was always manly—'his face,' she continued wit'i

decision, 'is an index to his character, I am sure.'

'If people were always what they looked there would be no deceit to guard against, no need of caution,' said Skene, with the slightest possible curl of his full upper lip.

'I am sure he is just as straightforward as he looks.'

'Then it would be useless for me to say anything to the contrary; yet I should have thought his presence in the house where Sir Peter lived would have proved him not altogether guileless.'

'If he had known of it. But they never happened to meet; and how could he guess who was his fellow-lodger?'

A flitting smile was meant to imply gentle incredulity, but Millicent was too downright to accept anything short of a direct assertion.

'Did he know?' she persisted.

Mark Skene had the grace to hesitate before telling the deliberate lie which was necessary if he wished to gain his end. Without any definite sense of rivalry, he was aware that the young artist had made a good impression, and it is proverbial that 'trifles light as air' will sway the jealously inclined.

'Yes, *he knew*. There is no doubt of that. I don't suppose he would even attempt denial if you asked him the question.'

'I shall not ask him,' she answered sadly.

For Nancy's sake she was sorry that the idol she had set up should already have exposed its feet of clay, and proved itself not worthy of her childlike adoration. For every reason she was disappointed ; the more so since the man had carried the good credentials of an open countenance and upright bearing, and that without any positive enthusiasm she also had come to admire and believe in him.

Mark Skene, although he had erred with some natural unwillingness, was content with his fault's success, and observed hastily :

'So, you see, it would be utterly Quixotic if Nancy were to refuse the fortune she has fairly won.'

'I cannot agree with you. The money is still Mr. Wolffe's by right. However he may have schemed, I could not advise her to take it. Let us talk about something else. I want to tell you what I did while up in London, and about something else.'

She then explained to him how she had sold the lease of the house, and that the holder wished to come in as soon as possible. The purchase-money was to be paid in three instalments ; the first was not to be called for until the little school at Putney had been disposed of.

'You see, she is a widow and in bad health. She has to struggle for bare exist-

ence, and it is necessary she should have change at once.'

'And in the meantime you yourself have sufficient——'

'That is what I want to ask you about. When I left I had bank-notes to the amount of £100, which I kept in my escritoire. It seemed too little to place in a bank, and I had some doubt whether they would consent to take charge of so small an amount. When I looked for the money this morning it was gone. The lock had been forced, but closed again so carefully I only detected the theft by chance. See !'

He followed her across the room and examined the rifled drawer, hesitating to express an opinion on the subject until he knew more.

'Whom do you suspect ?' he asked presently, his usual drawl more apparent from the deliberation with which he brought out his words.

'Nobody. It is impossible to fix on anyone in particular. People of whom we know actually nothing have been coming in and out of the house constantly within the last few days. The tradesmen heard of Sir Peter's illness and have been sending in their bills; then there have been the arrangements for the funeral, and the rooms upstairs being occupied, everyone had to be brought in here: Mrs. Scarrot has had a woman in to help her too. She was overworked.'

'I suppose the only thing to be done is to call in the police.'

'Would that do any good? We have absolutely no clue. There is nothing to fix the guilt on any one person; and there are disagreeables enough to be faced just now without adding that of a criminal inquiry.'

'Yet you cannot afford to remain idle under such a loss.'

'I have been thinking whether it would not

be throwing good money after bad to move in the matter. If I had the slightest suspicion it would be different. As it is, don't you think I should be wrong?'

'It is not advisable to stir up muddy waters unless something is to be gained by it: I agree with you there. But something ought to be done. The thief should not get off scot-free.' Skene said this with a man's dislike to submitting supinely to an injury.

Millicent was standing near the fire staring into it contemplatively, lacing and interlacing her fingers as she pondered.

'You see,' she said presently, 'Mrs. Scarrot is quite scared and nervous now; she would collapse completely if she knew this, and would never forgive herself because it happened while I was away.'

'You have not told her?'

'I have told no one—not even Nancy; she, poor child, has enough to trouble her.'

Mark Skene looked at Milly with a lingering gaze that saw and appreciated the strength of purpose in her expression. Beneath it he knew was a very tender feeling and a sweet self-forgetfulness he had never found in any other woman. No one admired virtue in the abstract more than he; no one considered it so indispensable a possession in a wife—his own lack of very high principle making him more exacting, rather than less so; for to see fictional beauty in that which lies beyond our individual reach is a universal trait of character, and a sign of the straining after better things which is inherent in every nature.

'When do you expect your first payment for this house?' he asked abruptly.

'That is quite uncertain, depending as it does on the sale of the school. I hope the time may not be long, as the house must go for anything it will fetch.'

'And in the meantime, how will you exist?'

'I have been thinking of that. Nancy is provided for. Having married Sir Peter, she must accept a competence from his estate, which, however small, will keep her from want. I can work for myself.'

'The difficulty is in finding work. What can you do while you are waiting?' he persisted remorselessly.

She flushed painfully and was silent for a moment; then, having a horror of false pride in every form, confessed that she hoped to be able to sell some jewellery, or to get a sufficient sum advanced upon its value. Mark Skene's face, too, grew redder as he listened; and a queer light came into his eyes that did not make his expression pleasanter, although his tones were frank, with only a trace of hurt feeling, as he remarked quietly:

'And you would rather do this than accept aid from me? It seems to me there must be something very repellant about me; for in spite of my best endeavour, I have never succeeded in winning your confidence, never been honoured by an appeal for help. What is it I have done? Wherein have I failed?'

Millicent could not reply—could not raise her eyes. She was touched by his reproach, which she felt was not unmerited, and she had a difficulty in explaining her reluctance to being under any obligation to him.

She knew he 'cared for her'—the one poor phrase which by most women is made to cover a dozen different gradations of feelings—and that in itself would have prevented her applying to him; besides this, although she had recently liked him better than formerly, she had never got over her prejudice, never entirely trusted him, even when he seemed most worthy of reliance.

'You have always been so good,' she began falteringly.

'That I have earned my reward at last. I am to be allowed to help you You will not refuse me this great favour?'

He spoke with some briskness, and a certainty of success she could not gainsay. While she was seeking for words in which to clothe her very real objections, he went on to arrange how the matter was to be managed, with a business-like air that carried her away, and reassured her somewhat as to the wisdom of her implied assent to his proposition. He was to lend her £50 now, and as much as she required later; and the debt incurred was to be liquidated on the dates at which she should receive payment for the Marine Square tenement, in three equal portions. All this was made to sound extremely reasonable, and to appear almost in the light of a benefit to Skene himself.

While Milly was still doubtful—bewildered by the rapidity and obscureness of some of his phrases—he withdrew, well content with the progress he had made.

Undermining is a tedious process, but if less brilliant than an open attack, it is often more certain in its effect.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOVING AND LOVED.

Sir Peter Cairne's will had been well drawn up, with so much simplicity there was no mistaking its meaning. Colonel Fayrer was sole trustee, and the whole of the property was left without reserve or restriction to his newly-made wife, Lady Cairne—formerly Miss Nancy Bell, of Marine Square, Brighton.

No other name was mentioned except, as an after-thought, the unflattering statement that the testator bequeathed, to his valet Jaynes, 'nothing but his thanks for services rendered during the last seven years;'

'because,' he went on to say, 'I have too much confidence in his natural intelligence not to feel sure that he has with his own hands well feathered his nest; and as I have never interfered with any of his efforts in that direction, so I feel myself absolved from all obligation to aid them.'

Colonel Fayrer, on reading this, took the earliest opportunity of paying the man his wages and sending him away.

So Jaynes departed—his invariable smile still upon his lips, but deep bitterness in his heart; and a misgiving—very galling to a person of his advanced views—that in this instance at least 'honesty' might have been 'the best policy.'

Wolffe was present at the reading of the will, and had only greeted the sisters with a distant bow; later in the day he sent them a formal notice of his departure. In response Millicent wrote him a little note asking him

to come down and speak to them at his earliest convenience.

He went at once. Though he felt it impossible to acquit Nancy of deliberate scheming towards the end she had attained, he was too just not to acknowledge that Millicent was guiltless of complicity in the matter, not only because she was away at the time of the hasty marriage, but because he believed her incapable of so treacherous an act—in a word, because he loved her, and therefore held her perfect.

His circumstances were sufficiently desperate to excuse the harshest strictures.

Not only had he been defrauded of a fortune he had every reason to expect, but he had also lost by Sir Peter's death the handsome allowance on which he had hitherto depended, and was thus cast entirely on his own resources.

Whether or not he could manage to exist

on the proceeds of his artistic labour was an open question, and he anticipated some trouble before it could be satisfactorily answered.

However, the elasticity of youth sustained him. Every gloomy prognostic was that instant set aside, and his rancour was softened as he stood in the presence of the woman whom he loved.

It was the first time he had set foot in the room which to him was consecrated by the fact that it was her dwelling-place; and after the somewhat constrained greetings were over, he paused a moment, while his gaze rested reverently on the various objects, each of which spoke eloquently of Millicent's identity.

Had Millicent been the one who had injured him, she would have been at once forgiven; but towards Nancy, the culprit, who with beating heart and lowered lashes was waiting

on his words as though life and death hung in the balance, he had no feeling at all—scarcely even resentment, so full was his heart of the one thought. Millicent spoke first, hesitating a little, yet with a repressed eagerness that showed her slowness was not caused by want of words, but only by anxiety to choose the right ones.

'It was kind of you to come. You must be as angry with us as we—are deeply ashamed. My sister wishes to explain her motives if you will only listen.'

'I will listen to anything you have to say.'

They had seated themselves on his entrance in the conventional fashion we seldom fail to observe even when situations wax most tragic. The artist occupied a high-backed chair similar to one on which Millicent sat confronting him, while Nancy had sunk nervously on the low fender-stool, within easy reach of her sister's

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hand, as though its propinquity could afford protection as well as support.

It was very hard to say what she had to say in cold blood, but she took courage from the fact that there seemed no anger nor impatience in Wolffe's expression, and it helped her that he did not look her way while she spoke.

'It all happened so suddenly. I need not tell you, I hope, that such a thing had never entered my head. When Sir Peter sent for me that evening he first heard you were here and offered to leave me his money, I refused at once. I never thought it possible to entertain such a proposal for a moment.'

'What altered your opinion?'

'The next morning Colonel Fayrer came to me and told me Sir Peter would leave all his money to some society or to Jaynes if I did not accept it. At best it was only a choice of evils, and——'

'You thought it better *you* should benefit by my misfortune than an outsider,' this with scorn he felt it impossible to repress.

The explanation was a tame one after all, and he did not think it improved the position or raised her who gave it in his estimation.

The shyness which caused her to keep her face averted he looked upon as a sign of conscious guilt; and his eyes, only resting on her for a moment, wandered back to Millicent with a sense of relief.

She looked so pure and good, so high above any such temptation. He almost found himself wishing that the case had been different —that it was she who had supplanted him and might now be deprecating his displeasure, that in her sweet abasement he might venture to take her in his arms, love her, and forgive her.

From the wild dreaming into which he had

suffered himself to stray, Nancy's voice recalled him.

'I thought that from my hands you would take back your fortune.'

He started and looked at her again.

'How could you think that?' he asked abruptly.

'I was wrong, perhaps; but it was my only chance of helping you. The money would have gone beyond your reach; you could never have possessed what is your own by every right. I took it—to give it back to you.'

Leslie Wolffe looked from one sister to another. The scene was a revelation to him. Having knocked about the world and often seen its worst side, he was not prepared for this explanation; yet he never doubted the reality of the disinterestedness of the sisters, or that they were in unison in wishing him to take what by law belonged to Nancy.

His under-lip twitched slightly with emotion. He knew that they were very poor and had to depend upon their own exertions, and he had the feeling of pity common to all strong men for any women in such a strait. And these two ladies were so delicate, so refined, so little able to brave the perils of a precarious existence.

Nancy, misunderstanding his long silence, could no longer control her excitement, and had risen to her feet.

'You did not think I wanted it for myself! It was for you, only you.'

He, too, rose and stood before her, looking very big in the small room, and a little awkward, as men will when under the influence of a strong feeling, not *so* strong as to have carried them away from the region of self-consciousness.

'I cannot tell you what I thought. I am

ashamed to have done you such injustice. I must ask you to be more generous to me than I have been to you.'

'Then it is all right, and you will take it?' eagerly said Nancy, while Millicent looked up in rapt suspense.

He shook his head in slow denial.

'That is not possible. The money is yours. It is sufficient pleasure to know that you did not intend to rob me. I am glad to think that in your effort to help me you have enriched yourself—and your sister.'

'But it is a disgrace to us to possess money which should be yours,' said Millicent in a low voice.

'And, oh!' cried Nancy brokenly, 'it would kill me to keep it.'

'Try and put yourself in my place,' he said with strange gentleness, addressing Nancy, though all his thoughts were with the elder sister, who sat so still and had only

twice opened her lips to speak. 'It would be dishonest to take what was never intended to be mine; it would be availing myself of an act which you would not have committed had you realized that it was deception. It was your warm heart led you away; but I should be guiltier far if, on calm reflection, I profited by what you had done. And no man could in any case take money from a woman. Don't you see that?'

'Not you—from me?' in tones so low, so tremulous with the feeling in her heart, that Millicent's hand went out to her with a restraining cautioning touch.

Wolffe saw the action, and although he did not understand its motive, somehow it thrilled him with a warmth of admiration he had not, with all his enthusiasm, felt before. How womanly she was and tender! Though only a girl in years, she was neither unfinished nor immature in manner; she possessed all

the sympathy of experience, without its deleterious effect. In everything she was

> 'Most sweet
> And most perfect, most complete.'

His rather rugged features softened wonderfully as he dwelt upon her without seeming to glance her way ; and his eyes, which had always redeemed him from the charge of actual plainness, became so brilliant, so suffused, that no wonder little seventeen-year-old Nancy was misled by their light and went on to say more, believing that only the shadow of this money lay across their mutual love :

'If you cared for me you would take it—or—share it with me.'

Trembling violently, and only realizing the force, the meaning, of her impulsive words when they were spoken beyond recall, she covered her face with her hands, and it seemed an endless period of time before the

silence that ensued was broken. She felt Millicent's arms closely wound about her, her soft cheek resting on her hair, while her pulses throbbed in most loving sympathy with her own distressful dread; but every sense was so strained toward one endeavour she could not pause to consider what it was that comforted her vaguely, and made it possible for her to wait until the answer came.

How long it was in coming! Even Millicent found the suspense unbearable, and lifted her lovely eyes imploringly to the artist's, which were bent upon her. 'She is only a child,' they seemed to say. 'How can you help loving her? Remember she loves you, and be pitiful even if you cannot love her in return.'

All this was in her mind, and written expressively in her face during the moment that she met his gaze; but it did not tend to clear the chaos in his mind, it only increased

his bewilderment and militated against the cause she had at heart.

Wolffe knew he had never loved her so desperately as now, when she was pleading with him to love another; although at the same time a certain feeling of tenderness arose within him for the pretty creature fluttering like a frightened bird in her embrace who was so dear to her, and who, alas! loved him. Looking back, he was fain to admit that he had not been altogether blameless at all times. He had taken pleasure in seeing Nancy's fleeting blushes, her shy delight in his praise; and miscomprehending her *naïveté*, the childish abandonment of her manner, had believed her capable of holding her own in an innocent flirtation; moreover, his interest had become very real when the likeness between the two sisters was more than usually apparent.

He understood how it was the mistake had

arisen, and repenting each too tender word, too lingering glance, in metaphorical sackcloth and ashes, he cudgelled his brain to discover how he might best convey the truth to her.

The idea that she had alluded to a division of the property as a purely financial solution of the problem before them was quite untenable, since this would by no means account for her confusion; yet the kindest action on his part was to affect to believe that it was so, to spare her the pain of knowing she was rejected, although in justice to himself he must speak very plainly.

'There could be only one woman from whom a man might accept so munificent a gift—his wife; and you and I, Miss Nancy, are not prepared to take so tremendous a step as marriage,' he returned lightly. 'Besides, I have a pleasant conviction that I can make my way by the labour of my own right hand,

and I should not like to be balked at the outset of my endeavour by help, however kindly it were meant. By-and-by I shall solicit your patronage, and be confident that you will not refuse it. You will be a personage, I foresee, and I shall always like to hear of your success. I cannot tell you how glad I am that you—and your sister—are the gainers by my loss.'

The earnestness he had purposely banished from his tone at first had gathered as he proceeded, and when Nancy raised her head and looked at him with wide-open, astonished eyes, Millicent's clasp relaxed, and presently she moved away, so that when he ceased speaking the two stood practically alone.

'I—I think I understand,' murmured the desolate possessor of a title, a house in town, and some thousands a year.

'When you are older and have more know-

ledge of the world, you will see it all even more clearly.'

'I have been very foolish.'

'No mere wisdom could have been so swee and womanly,' he said, his blue eyes shining down on her kindly. 'The bitterness which I confess was in my heart at first is eradicated, and will not return. I can almost forgive Sir Peter, since only through his unmerited anger could I have experienced your friendship, which I value more highly than I can say.'

So pathetic grew her expression that he could not trust himself any further, and with a forced smile, meant to be reassuring, he took her small cold hand and said good-bye, promising to see her again before he went away.

Millicent only slightly turned her head to bow as he went out.

She was thinking that all he had said was incompatible with the view Mark Skene had taken of his conduct, and feeling desperately

sorry for Nancy, the more so that she fancied matters might have ended differently had they not been forced into this premature development. Whatever his faults, the artist was a true man, tender with women, yet strong in his resolution to face the difficulties of his position without assistance. He was so big—and a little heavy in appearance—that she had not expected from him such delicate treatment of a question whose awkwardness was certainly not lessened by the presence of a third person. His voice had been very pleasant, and at the same time invigorating, effectually clearing the atmosphere of anything like *gêne*.

As she lost herself in these conjectures, Nancy crept timidly to her side and pulled at her sleeve.

'Oh, Millie!' she whispered in pitiful inquiry, 'do you think he could have guessed?' And while comfort was being administered in loving fashion, Mr. Skene was

announced, and the subject for the time was set aside.

He had arrived when the interview was only just beginning, and Mrs. Scarrot, opening the door for him, informed him her young ladies were particularly engaged, and asked him to sit down in the hall.

The two carved chairs set in the narrow draughty passage not being inviting, he suggested that he should accompany her to the kitchen instead, a proposition which flattered her extremely, and in consequence rendered her amiably discursive.

She told him, as he sat by the roaring fire, every incident of the funeral that had taken place earlier in the day, and a great many other things he had not heard before.

'It's like a dream that poor Sir Peter ever came to us,' she concluded.

'Miss Nancy has reason to remember it was real.'

'I'm glad she's got the money, since the poor young gentleman as should have been the heir has lost it.'

'They may arrange it between themselves, so that no harm will be done.'

'You mean he may marry her, sir? I don't think that. It's not *her* he's been in love with all these weeks—if I know anything about these things.'

'Which I am sure you do,' he interposed artfully.

'Well, my opinion is he worships the very ground Miss Millicent walks on. He used to get me to talk of her sometimes, and listen with all his ears, and such a look in his bonny blue eyes—it was like being in church.'

'And—she—Miss Millicent?'

'She's never known nor cared. She's not one to be always thinking of love and lovers. I've never seen her favour anyone as she's favoured you.'

Skene looked at her suspiciously, thinking for a moment she might be only saying so to please him, and with an object—an idea that was immediately dismissed. Her pale worn face, on which was an anxious frown, precluded all thought of duplicity; however foolish and irresponsible she might be, she was sincere.

'Tell me,' she went on in an eager whisper, 'has Miss Millicent lost anything?'

'Why do you ask?' sharply.

'Because she'd tell you if she told anyone, sir; and I've a queer notion in my head, though I couldn't say it really happened—for it was in the middle of the night, and I have such bad nightmares at times, I'm afraid when I think of it, sir.'

Mrs. Scarrot's face was working nervously, and she looked about her in a scared way, that showed her fears, however exaggerated and causeless, were at least real. With some

prescience of what was coming, Skene told her rather impatiently to go on.

'It was the night Miss Millicent came back, sir, and I'd been fast asleep. It may have been I was asleep then, but I thought I got out of bed with a feeling something was happening. I'd heard no sound, there was nothing to put the idea into my mind; but when I got into the kitchen I saw a light moving in the opposite room, and the next moment Jaynes came out of it. He had a candle in his hand, but the light did not fall on me, and I was thankful for that, for Mr. Skene, his face was the face of a thief, and I don't think he'd have stopped short of *murder* —if he'd seen me then !'

She broke off in a burst of excited tears, and sank on the nearest chair, altogether overcome. The recital, fitting in with what he knew, gave her hearer also subject for thought.

His first feeling was one of comical contempt for Jaynes, who, in spite of his melodramatic appearance, had only compassed such a very paltry villainy; but gradually he became aware that if this story were made known to Millicent she would .prosecute the man, and probably recover her money.

In that case she would not need his help, or accept it, and he would be no nearer to her than before, having established no claim upon her—that was, *if she heard this story*. But why should she hear it? It would be easy to persuade Mrs. Scarrot the whole thing was the chimera of an overwrought brain.

Her sobs had ceased already, and she was wiping her face with the corner of her apron.

'Have you ever consulted any doctor?' he asked her gravely.

'I? No. What for? Do you think it was nightmare, or that I fancied it all?'

'I think you must have a very bad

digestion. You should be most careful what you eat.'

She stared at him blankly for a moment.

'You are sure Miss Millicent has lost nothing?'

'Quite sure. I should certainly have heard of it. Take my advice, Mrs. Scarrot, and don't frighten her with these dreams of yours. She is not too strong, and has so much on her mind just now.'

As he spoke he passed one hand slowly down the front of his coat, and in so doing touched the pocket-book wherein lay the bank-notes he had brought with him as substitutes for this very loss he had denied so glibly.

But if his conscience pricked him, it was only for a moment; it did not trouble him longer, since remorse only haunts the very sensitive mind, and his was constitutionally phlegmatic.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN SPITE OF HERSELF.

Now that it was decided Nancy must take up the burden of her wealth, it became a question how she should make her entrance into the new world now opening before her, unlocked by the golden key that fate had thrust into her hand. On one point Millicent was obdurate. She refused to derive any benefit from this suddenly acquired fortune, nor would she suffer it, even in a small degree, to influence her movements.

It seemed to be Nancy's duty to make the best of what had happened, and no doubt in time she would habituate herself to what

now was a novelty; but Millicent would have considered it a degradation to touch any of the money which ought to have been Wolffe's, although why she felt this vehement repugnance she did not pause to consider.

To Nancy's prayers that she would live with her she turned a deaf ear, resolutely insisting on her well-known love of independence. Nancy knew her too well to doubt the sincerity of her protest, and abstained from her entreaties after awhile, relapsing into an indifference from which it was difficult to arouse her.

This fortune she had inherited had cut her off from all she cared for. Between the man she loved and herself it threatened to be an insurmountable barrier, while the feeling of loneliness grew intolerable when she realized that it would also separate her from her sister.

That it was impossible to live by herself she understood, and Skene's suggestion that she should advertise for a chaperone was angrily rejected.

'It is bad enough to be as friendless as we are, without making the fact generally known,' she said bitterly to Colonel Fayrer one day when, together with Millicent, they were discussing the subject.

As her sole trustee, he had had a great deal to do with her arrangements, and had been so useful to the sisters that they had fallen into the habit of consulting him on all occasions.

'You have no near friend?' he asked now, in the stiff, unemotional way which was his habit.

'No one much older or wiser than myself.'

'And that is indispensable,' added Millicent, smiling.

'I think I should like to go abroad. To

live with any strangers is a sort of exile: I should feel it less if quite away.'

There was a despairing ring beneath the reckless lightness of her tone that touched Fayrer to the quick. He diverged so far from his usual careless nonchalance as to say, with quiet pity in his tones:

'All changes are difficult at first. I am afraid, Miss Nancy, these riches are not making you very happy; but by-and-by——'

'I am not unhappy,' she interrupted.

He maintained an eloquent silence. Millicent had moved over to the writing-table, and was looking through some papers which rustled as she turned them over, and prevented her hearing what was said.

'I do not look unhappy, do I?' anxiously.

'One does not expect to see it in your face. One does not see the stars in the sky by daylight; but one knows they are there, only waiting for the darkness to become apparent.'

'By this I hope you are not implying that I cry myself to sleep after hours of successful dissimulation?'

'I should like to see you looking as bright and free from care as you did that afternoon when I came here first.'

'I am much brighter, I assure you. I am glistening with gold, and if I move a little stiffly at first it is because I am not yet used to my own brilliancy, not because I do not appreciate its presence. I assure you wealth is a misfortune most women bear with equanimity.'

'I do not look on you as I do on most women.'

'No? that is your mistake. The second you have made within these last few moments. I do not even aspire to be different. I know I am not better than the rest—I hope I am not worse.'

'You are——' began the guardsman; then

stopped abruptly. Millicent, returning to her seat, had paused in passing them, arrested by something in his face she had not seen before; and meeting her gaze, he knew his secret was discovered and not disapproved.

Hastily he screwed his eyeglass in his eye and assumed his most matter-of-fact air as he addressed her, bent on winning her completely to his side.

'Miss Bell, would you allow your sister to stay with mine? She lives in London, and is going abroad in the spring, so that it might suit Miss Nancy's—I mean Lady Cairne's—plans to be with her.'

'But your sister might not care to be so burdened.'

'I think I can answer for her. Her husband is in India, her children are at school; she would be very glad of someone to share her solitude. I will write to her at once, and if you will think it over——'

'Nancy is her own mistress; we keep forgetting that.'

'My sister shall write direct to — Lady Cairne.'

Nancy smiled in a shadowy sort of fashion, as at the ghost of a jest. Sometimes her present position seemed like a masquerade, and she could even extract some amusement from it; at other times it became so serious as to approach the tragic. Now she was hovering between both ideas, and unwilling to commit herself to any definite statement of her wishes; so that there was no more said about it.

'Don't you think that it is rather strange Colonel Fayrer should suggest such a thing?' she asked Millicent when they were alone. 'I wonder what is his "bad motive," as Mark Skene would say?'

'I don't suppose he ever had a bad motive in his life,' indignantly.

'You are very enthusiastic.'

'I feel so. He is the sort of man one might trust to the death. If he were a lineal descendant of King Arthur or Sir Galahad, he could not be more courtly, more chivalrous, or more honourable.'

'Perhaps,' said Nancy with a curl of her lips, 'he *is* a Knight of the Round Table. He looks very well preserved. Perhaps if he were put into water to soak, like dried apples, or those small white beans——'

'You think only of his appearance.'

'But I don't mind allowing he may possess something to counteract it. He reminds me of the young woman held up to us as a pattern by the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table." She did not pine away or die when parted from her husband, but showed her grief by getting jaundice.'

'I don't see what that has to do with Colonel Fayrer.'

'I did not think you would be so slow at drawing an inference. My idea has always been that he has had a great passion for someone. She died or jilted him, or fell short in some way of his extraordinarily high standard, and he in despair shrivelled up and turned a bright orange.'

'A little sallowness——'

'Does not always cover a multitude of virtues, and "if he be not fair for me, what care I how *sallow* he be?" It is no good, Millie'—putting her two hands on her sister's shoulders, and looking at her with sad eyes that mutely contradicted the smile upon her lips—'I am not so easily diverted. It was foolish of me to care for a man who never seriously thought of me ; but I shall be foolish till I die, and you must make the best of my folly.'

'You don't even know where he is, Nancy, and you may never see him again.'

A few days before, Leslie Wolffe had left their roof, but the farewell visit he had punctiliously paid could not by any stretch of an optimistic imagination have been termed a success. While all three were together the conversation was strained and stilted; when Millicent withdrew, hoping that with her the constraint which had oppressed them might disappear, he broke up the *tête-à-tête* by hastily bidding Nancy good-bye. Since then they had heard nothing of him, and did not even know if he were in Brighton.

'That makes no difference; nothing can make any difference, I think. Millicent, is it not cruel that I must go on caring even against my will? I hate *myself* because I have no pride, no strength of character; but it all ends in loving *him* the more. Oh, Millie, Millie, I think my heart will break!'

She buried her face in her sister's neck, and

fell to weeping in a quiet, passionless way that was more pathetic than any violence of emotion, filling Millicent with a sorrowful conviction that the wound was deeper than she had believed, and might not easily be cured. Hers was not the temperament to 'jest at scars' because she herself had 'never felt a wound'; on the contrary, Nancy's grief seemed to make her sacred, and she looked on at its expression with awed silence, in which was wonderment as well.

That women could love so without limit, and with no reason, was—in spite of all she had read in books—a revelation ; since it is only by personal application one realizes any truth, though it may have been so universally apparent as to become proverbial. Indeed, is it not a fact that all our hardest experience can effect for us is to impress upon us the wisdom of phrases with which we have been almost contemptuously familiar from our child-

hood? That the 'common lot,' the pain which has ravaged every woman's heart since the world held sufficient inhabitants to render intricacies of choice possible, should have fallen so early and so heavily upon Nancy—little laughing Nancy, who, the very spirit of joy herself, had seemed created to dance and sing through existence, imparting delight to all who came about her—this was a mystery; yet Millicent was compelled to admit that the man who had aroused these feelings was not unworthy of them, and would not very easily be forgotten.

She could understand that, compared with him, her more elderly admirer seemed uninteresting, lacking in energy and life; while the strictures on his personal appearance had not been altogether undeserved.

So she resolved not to interfere, but to leave the cure to time and change of scene. Nancy was so young that, however hopeless

things might seem now, no irreparable damage could have been done.

The idea that had entered suddenly into Colonel Fayrer's mind, and had been as hastily expressed, was subsequently carried into effect. A most cordial invitation came from his sister, the Hon. Mrs. Rose; and this was after a little deliberation accepted. It was arranged that Nancy should go to her at once, and stay with her at least until Sir Peter's mansion in Park Lane was ready to receive her; and it was likely she would accompany her abroad. Captain Rose being in India as aide-de-camp to his Excellency the Viceroy, his wife had always thought it more seemly to avoid the season's gaieties, and had usually left town when they commenced. It seemed to Millicent that it would be better for Nancy also to keep quiet until Sir Peter had been dead a year, and the story of their strange marriage was forgotten by most people.

Nancy, being in mourning for her father at the time of Sir Peter's death, had not considered it necessary to make any further alteration in her attire. She was sorry, as she would have been sorry for the loss of any friend; but the events that had preceded his demise had insensibly lessened the affection she had felt before, nor was she one to pretend more sorrow than she felt. Millicent was too honest herself to persuade her sister to wear anything approaching a widow's garb.

She had also supported her wish to keep her maiden name, but this idea both Mr. Skene and Colonel Fayrer strenuously opposed. It would, they explained, be giving a handle to people who were inclined to see something suspicious in the circumstances of Nancy's succession to Sir Peter's property; and she owed it to herself to give them no such cause for scandal.

In their decision Nancy acquiesced with a pitiful little quiver of her lips. She felt that while she was called by the name which had once been borne by Wolffe's mother, she was farther than ever from him ; and if, like an old man of the sea, it was to cling to her always, she must not dare to look forward to anything the future could bestow.

The sense of hopelessness did not diminish as the days went on. Though now and then she had fits of high spirits, during which she would have seemed to an outsider to be as gay as ever, there were moments when she was so still, and looked so pale, that Millicent's heart ached to see her, and she dreaded more than ever the moment of their parting. Who would be so tender with the child as she? Who would love her so dearly and sympathize with her so completely?

When the day came on which they were to separate, she felt inclined to give up all her

visions of independence and submit to be a pensioner on her sister's bounty.

Only the thought that by every law of right and justice the money ought to belong to Wolffe restrained her. She hoped to compromise the matter by looking out for something to do in London, so that she might be near, if not actually in the same house with her sister, and able to help or advise in any emergency. Even as it was, a slight impetus would have urged her to alter all her plans, though probably the hasty act would have been afterwards repented at leisure.

Nancy, however, had wept all her tears and exhausted all her emotions during a long sleepless night, and now, though red-eyed and depressed, had grown a little hard as well. Earlier in the morning she had gladdened Mrs. Scarrot's heart by promising to make her housekeeper in Park Lane, and had rather sharply set aside Millicent's remark that she

would, perhaps, not be equal to so responsible a post.

'Let me make somebody happy with this money,' she had said, and in so saying effectually closed the argument.

Now at the last moment she sat at the table, where lunch was laid out, picking forlornly at the dainty morsels Millicent kept presenting to her notice.

'No, thank you; I am only eating because you wish me to eat, not because I am hungry,' she said, with an air of martyrdom, when sauce was offered as an adjunct.

'Even duty can be made pleasant,' said her sister, smiling, although her heart failed her.

'I *prefer* it to be disagreeable. Then I am sure I am doing it,' returned Nancy, resenting her sister's sense of humour, and speaking with a touch of her old spirit.

But everything was forgotten and her grief burst out afresh when the charwoman appeared

to say the cab was at the door, the luggage already on, and Colonel Fayrer, who was to act as escort, waiting.

She clung to her sister as though she could never let her go, as though in parting from her she severed the last link with a past that had been very sweet though 'wild with all regret.'

Not for long afterwards could Millicent banish from her remembrance the vision of a small tear-stained face stretched out of the cab window so long as the house was in sight; the backward glance, straining to catch the last glimpse of her; all the passionate loving and grieving of her soul shining in her deep gray eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOOD-BYE.

VERY lonely was Millicent during the days that followed Nancy's departure. It seemed as if all the brightness of illusion had gone out of her life, and only the sober-tinted reality remained. She shrank from going out into the world to face its trials unprotected and alone. There was nothing masculine in her nature ; the events of the last few months had forced her into a self-reliance which was more than half assumed, while in her heart was the womanly desire to lean on another's strength, so that she deserved the more credit for the bravery which so far she

had displayed. Now that she had no longer to take care of her sister as well as herself, her spirit failed her, and her interest in the question as to how she was to provide for her own existence flagged.

The lady who had rented her house wished to take possession of it at once, so she was compelled to bestir herself; and not until the necessary steps were taken, and she was only waiting to see whether there would be any answers to her advertisements, had she leisure to reflect how desolate a thing it was to be without a home, and with no friends on whom she could rely.

Two or three people she had known during her father's lifetime had written to her when he died, wishing to assist, but these offers, refused then, had not been repeated; all these people lived too far away to render a short visit practicable, and Millicent would not have cared to make a long stay anywhere.

It was a great surprise, but by no means a pleasant one, that Dr. Porter, who had made occasion to pay her several visits after Sir Peter's death, should have come forward at this juncture and asked her formally to be his wife. His practice, he told her (thereby reawakening her old bitterness against him), had considerably increased of late, and he was in a position to keep her in comfort, even luxury, should she make him happy by consenting. His offer was, however, rejected in terms impossible to mistake, so clear were they and scathing in their cold contempt. The fear that he might annoy her by pressing his suit caused her to hasten to decide on some course of action. Thinking and hesitating over what she had to do only made the matter worse; it was better to plunge boldly into the unknown, lest her courage should evaporate altogether. Since she had accepted Mark Skene's help

she had liked him better ; it was impossible not to appreciate his delicacy in the matter, and all trace of any lover-like impressiveness had disappeared from his manner towards herself.

But Mark Skene had gone up to London on business, and she had not even him to talk to—she had not known how pleasant it was to receive his sympathy until it was temporarily withdrawn.

It was nearing Christmas time, and a suspicion of frost rendered the sunshine brighter and the air more exhilarating. Most of Millicent's time was spent out of doors, taking long walks out into the country or across the Downs, and once, as she was passing the Grand Hotel, Leslie Wolffe saw her from one of the windows and hurried out in pursuit. In the hope of some such happy chance he had lingered on in his expensive quarters, dipping deeply into the sum which

stood to his credit at his bankers, and deferring the commencement of his struggle after fame. But he counted time and money both well spent when he found himself behind her, so close that he could hear the rustle of her skirts and the click of her heels on the hard road. She walked well, with an easy grace of carriage that suggested a pliable figure and perfect health. The small head was erect, its outline softened by the light curls that grew into the nape of her white neck, and the loose strands that blew about her ears. Wolffe felt loath to give up this certain pleasure of watching her as she went, for the doubtful good of addressing her, perhaps to be rebuffed for his presumption.

But when he spoke, although she started, her colour deepening, she showed no displeasure; and when he asked permission to accompany her for a little way she at once assented.

For awhile they talked of indifferent

matters, until Nancy's name was mentioned, and then Millicent told him how she had gone to stay with Colonel Fayrer's sister as a temporary arrangement.

'The house in Park Lane has been neglected, and was never the cheeriest of dwelling-places. She was right not to go there at once; it would only have depressed her.'

'You know the house well, of course.'

'I was born there—spent most of my life there, in fact. My mother was a stately-looking woman who suited her surroundings, and then the house was at its best. I have a vivid memory of huge parties that were given then, and my mother coming into the nursery to show herself to me. She wore velvet, generally of some rich hue, and her diamonds were fixed like a crown upon her brow.'

'I heard that she was very beautiful.'

'She was more than that. I could not describe the sweetness of her manner; even

her pride sat graciously upon her and became part of herself. I had always the feeling that one ought to bend down on one knee and kiss her hand, not touch it in ordinary greeting.'

'You must have been very fond of her,' softly.

'I adored her. It was a terrible blow when she married Sir Peter. I never understood her infatuation for him, but it was very real; stronger than herself, and she was not a weak woman. Love that comes late in life is difficult to subdue; yet I know she tried, and that it cost her more than anyone knew to sacrifice me to those new feelings —and she suffered afterwards.'

'She could never have foreseen what has occurred.'

He shook his head.

'It was no very great surprise to me. Sir Peter always hated me; he would have hated

anyone who was his heir. Even while my mother lived he could not bear me to go near him. It was the strangest chance that took me where he was—a judgment, perhaps! You know of my impertinence in following your sister home? I have felt horribly ashamed; I have not even dared to apologize.'

'It all seems so long ago.'

'And it is only a few weeks. The great events of our lives are often crowded into the smallest space of time. I never dreamed then where fate, in the shape of your sister, was leading me.'

'It was her thoughtlessness. She is very young, and if you knew how she is suffering now you would forgive her. She never meant to injure you.'

'I am sure she did not,' he said cordially.

They had walked so quickly that they were opposite the Square where she lived, and now they stood still. He laid one hand on the

railing, deliberately intending to linger so long as she would permit, since he had no hope of seeing her again for a long time, and every moment he could snatch was infinitely precious. It was very sweet to him when she lifted her eyes to his face and spoke with pained entreaty:

'You will not let what happened always stand between us? You will go and see her when you are in town, and prove to her she is forgiven?'

'I will do whatever you wish,' he said, with a warmth that made the red and white in her cheek mingle in exquisite disorder. Then in a more matter-of-fact tone he added: 'At first I shall be very busy. I have to begin to earn my own livelihood—a novelty which doubtless will be very amusing, but will mean hard work as well. When my foot is on the lowest rung of the ladder I will take her the good news.'

'And you will accept no help from her? I cannot understand why you will not. It was your mother's money, and should be yours. Nancy has no right to it at all.'

She has possession of it—a strong legal argument.'

'At least take half of it, so that she may enjoy the rest.'

He paused a moment before replying.

'I thought,' he said hesitatingly, 'I had explained my feelings on the subject. I don't think I am singular in this respect, but I should feel myself the veriest cur if I took the means of subsistence from a woman's hand. If I loved anyone, and she loved me well enough to be my wife, it would be otherwise. Perfect love would, I dare say, exorcise the demon pride.'

'If you knew Nancy better—knew her sweet nature, how loving she is, how true——'

She stopped in confusion, suddenly com-

prehending that by saying all this she was pleading Nancy's cause, and in so doing sacrificing her dignity, perhaps to no avail. Whether this were so or no, her words were beyond recall, and she could only wait in strained suspense to see what would be their result. Turning her face away, she looked across the sea at the grand wave-mountains, that, reaching their highest eminence, took magnificent inward curves, through whose transparency the sun shone brightly, and showed a rich, deep green flecked with sparkling lights and pure soft shades, for one brief moment before they broke, then lost all colour in a maelstrom of fair white foam. And always other waves came on, full of pride and beauty, full of life and strength, only to disappear in the same way, to be as though they had not been. As a running accompaniment to the glorious music of the waves when they came leaping and lashing them-

selves into fury, as they threw themselves with vehemence against the low stone piers jutting out into the sea, there was harmony in a minor key. The water which washed the shore fretted against its shingle with the irresistible fascination of a well-remembered air, whose melody seems the pleasanter from repetition.

To Leslie Wolffe, never blind to nature's beauties, this was the most perfect hour he had ever enjoyed. Never before had the sunshine seemed so bright, the outlook so grand. Even the ships as they went by seemed conscious that this day was not as other days, and spread their sails with haughtier grace, while the smaller boats dashed through the roughest sea with a verve and abandonment that infected those who gazed with a reckless sense of enjoyment.

Wolffe felt it was worth all the suffering he had ever known to live this moment—near

her, and not at variance with her; so near that he could hear her gentle breathing, and the flutter of her soft black gown in the wind.

He had half lost the sense of what she said in listening to her voice, and only her continued silence reminded him he must reply.

'Your sister is, I know, all that you say and more; but—I could never take from her —never——'

It was a broken sentence stammeringly uttered, but its meaning was very clear, and he knew it must have been so, and would have given his right hand at that moment to have completed it, to have explained to her that he could never love anybody but herself. But her head was still turned away, it might be in anger; he could only see one crimson ear and her eyelashes meeting in a delicious tangle on her cheek.

So they stood for some minutes silently, while the strong wind rushed past them, and

the cold gradually made itself felt, as the glow which had come from exercise died away, leaving a keener sense of chillness.

Shivering, Millicent thrust her hands into her muff and faced him again.

'If I do not see you before you go, I wish you every success,' she said, in rather a conventional tone.

He thanked her, and there was another pause. Her remark was equivalent to a dismissal, yet he could not tear himself away.

'And you—shall you stay here?' he asked presently, as an excuse for lingering.

'No; we have sold the house. I am going up to town.'

'I trust I may meet you there. I shall have no difficulty in finding out your sister, and, as I said, she is to have the first news of my success.'

'And if you do *not* succeed?'

'I shall disappear. There must be very many who have failed hidden away beneath the smooth surface of London society. I should only be one more wreck.'

'You must *not* fail. It would be too great a disappointment to everybody,' said Millicent, with a friendly smile, and gave him her gloved hand.

He held it for a moment, during which she was thinking how strong and capable he looked, how little likely to succumb in any struggle; while something in his eyes—an expression she had seen in them once before—caused her own to droop.

'If you care——'

'We must *all* care,' she interposed hastily.

'Then be very sure that I shall keep my head above water if I can. I have before me a fair goal,' he said, with a strange triumphant ring in his voice.

He turned and strode away; while she,

with a feeling of keen exhilaration nothing that had been said or done appeared to justify, hurried across the road and through the square.

The pavement on which she walked was in shadow, the bare trees in the garden to her right were swayed to and fro by the wind, and the leaves were whirled in wild circles across the dry dead grass. This may have given to her thoughts a tinge of regret. It was such a contrast to the brightness in which she had been bathed a little while ago, and she remembered that she was leaving it all behind her soon, perhaps for ever, and that even if she came back to Brighton it would never be the same.

Each had been unaware of the actual position of the other. Leslie Wolffe had taken it for granted that Millicent was going to live with her sister; it had been from the first pleasant to think that she must benefit

by his misfortune, and he had not stayed to consider whether she was the sort of woman to live on charity, though she who offered it was so near of kin. Nor had it entered Millicent's head that the artist was worse off now than he had been before Sir Peter's death. When he had talked of success she had thought of a struggle after fame, not a fight for bare existence, or she could not have bidden him good-bye so quietly.

Neither she nor Nancy had ever dreamed of his utter destitution, nor would he for the world have let the fact escape him, fully aware how it would distress them to know the truth—more especially as he could not ease their minds by accepting help.

So they had talked together, both in a lighter strain than had been consistent with their real feelings, though each longed for the sympathy that in either case would have been warmly rendered. Indeed, so strong was the

craving for consolation and support in Millicent's heart, that she even welcomed the news which met her as she entered the house.

'Mr. Skene was there, and had been waiting half an hour or more,' said Mrs. Scarrot, and Millicent ran downstairs with a lightning speed that Nancy might have emulated but not surpassed, while her smile was absolutely brilliant as she held out her hand to her visitor.

'I am so glad you are back.'

'Not so glad as I to be here again.'

'Where have you been—in London all the time?'

He nodded, looking down at her with his slow appreciative smile.

'It has seemed an eternity,' he said, 'and now I want to tell you what I have done.'

CHAPTER XIX.

LOVERS ONCE.

Content with the progress he had made up to the present date, Mark Skene was very unwilling that Millicent should now pass beyond his reach; but yet was well aware that to precipitate matters would be to spoil his chances, believing that it would only be when there was no other resource open to her that she would accept his proposal as a means of escape from difficulties too many and complicated for her to surmount. That such a pretty girl would meet with disagreeables in any position of dependence he felt convinced, and he meditated posing as her protector

until she grew into the habit of relying on his care.

To make this scheme feasible he must arrange she should go to some house where he had the *entrée* and could be certain no other would step in to fill the *rôle* he himself devoutly hoped to play.

This object had taken him to London and kept him there some days.

More obstacles lay in his way than he had anticipated. In the first instance, those he knew best who required a governess or companion were already suited, and had it not been so, after several unsatisfactory interviews he began to understand that a bachelor's recommendation would scarcely be accepted as sufficient.

He had almost given up his project in despair, and decided that he must take his chance of afterwards gaining a footing in the house which would be her temporary abode, when,

pa sing down Curzon Street, the brightness of some windows with draperies of silk and a profusion of flowers in the outside boxes caught his eye and imbued him with new hope.

Stepping back, he mounted the one door-step and rang and knocked jauntily. Here, if anywhere, he would succeed. What a fool he had been not to think of it before!

The manservant who answered his summons informed him Mrs. Messiter was at home, and led the way upstairs to the drawing-room, passing the door of a smaller room, the interior of which a half-drawn Indian *purdah* enabled him to see.

It was fitted up as a ladies' sanctum, and Skene thought he saw the flutter of feminine garments as someone moved hurriedly from the escritoire. If it were the person he had come to see, she required some time to make up her mind to traverse the short distance

that was between them, for nearly ten minutes elapsed before she made her appearance, and during the interval Mark Skene amused himself by a close scrutiny of his surroundings. The red silk blinds drawn half-way down, the soft 'art-muslin' gathered into graceful festoons in an endeavour to exclude every ray of brilliant unbecoming sunshine, caused a sardonic smile to curve his full lips.

'She is not altered; she is as pretty as ever, or tries to persuade others that she is so. If she had taken a serious turn, as so many do who fail to reach the desired object by any other way, or if she had lost faith in her power to attract, every blind might have been drawn up to the top regardless of results,' he soliloquized cynically, and further investigation confirmed him in his first impressions.

It was essentially the room of a woman who sacrificed everything to her own appear-

ance, and who wished to seem what she was not and could never hope to be.

The photographs which were strewn about were those of professional beauties and public characters—very few looked as if they might have been personal friends ; the current number of the *World*, and an older one of the *Queen*—the lady's newspaper—which were displayed prominently on a small table near a sofa, covered a copy of *Modern Society*, shorn of its pink wrapper.

A great many of the visiting-cards which he discovered in a Chinese bowl showed signs of age, as well as care as evident ; while the only two which boasted a title had somehow reached the surface. One was surmounted with a coronet, and bore the name of Count D'Esterre; the other belonged to a lady well known once in the fashionable world, but now compelled by force of an adverse social *vehmgericht* to take a lower standing.

Skene had got thus far on his voyage of discovery when the door opened and Elsie Messiter came in. Even as he took her outstretched hand and returned her smiling greeting, he reflected that the fact that she had changed her gown held out to him fair promise of success in his mission, proving as it did an anxiety to please. The skirts which had been whisked out of sight as he passed the other door were sombre in their hue, while those she wore now were pale heliotrope in hue, and of some rich material.

No, she had not altered much. Her hair was more golden, perhaps, though not naturally so ; but she wore it in the same untidy, rather artistic fashion, which some six or seven years ago it had been his pleasure to admire. In the chastened light her complexion seemed as fair as in those days—her eyes as bright; and the tremor that came into her voice—probably brought there with

intention—thrilled him even now, callous though he was, and inclined only to be critical.

'It is charming of you to come to see me,' she said.

'I wonder I have not been before,' he answered with self-possession, as he took in every detail of her appearance.

Her figure, if somewhat artificial in its proportions, was a very pretty one, and her gown fitted to perfection; but he noticed—and remembered that he had noticed before, even in the zenith of his infatuation—that her hands were ill-shaped, and her wrists big, although quite white.

'I find it exceedingly pleasant now that I am here,' he went on drawlingly, not waiting her permission to sink into a luxuriously cushioned seat—a breach of courtesy she was not likely to detect nor to resent. She chose a low chair facing him, but with her back to

the light, and followed his glance as it wandered round the room.

'It is comfortable enough, but—I am very lonely sometimes. Once or twice I wrote to you.'

'I am away so much it is always uncertain when my letters will reach me, or if they reach me at all. And now tell me what you have done since—since your husband died;' he substituted this dating-point as safer than that which had risen naturally to his lips. But she was too quick not to observe the slight pause, and interpret it aright.

Never for one instant, after she entered the room, had the consciousness left her that the last time she had spoken to this man she had been clasped closely in his arms in a despairing last embrace—she in girlish abandonment of grief, he himself not unmoved, although retaining sufficient command of himself not to

make any sacrifice for her sake. This knowledge had embittered her and made of her the worldly woman that she now was. Yet though she had never spared him in putting the matter clearly to herself, and realized that he who loved her well enough to marry her in spite of her poverty and low extraction was the nobler of the two, the most deserving, it was Mark Skene she had always loved and loved still, passionately and against all reason, although for so many years she had never met his glance, or touched his hand. She wondered what had brought him here now, believing that without a motive he would not have come; and the wonderment made her a little excited, and more interesting in the eyes of him who watched her critically with a half-smile.

'What have I done?' she repeated absently. 'How do most women spend their lives? Driving, dancing or dining, and always

dressing; the latter saves us from dying of sheer monotony. If it were not that the fashions of clothes alter we should have no landmarks; we should forget sometimes where we are and how enjoying ourselves, or if enjoying ourselves at all. These amusements are so much the same; it is only by the wearing of a bonnet or a ball-dress we distinguish them.'

'This is the life you longed for once.'

'I was young once. How much one can learn and unlearn in six years, or is it seven?'

'You must not appeal to me; I could imagine it but yesterday;' an inflection of mock tenderness was in his tone.

She went on hurriedly:

'After all, it has been pleasant enough. I don't know why I should complain, except that I always hated a beaten track and obligations of any shape or sort. Once one puts foot on the treadmill of society one must go on moving in time, and in the same direction

always, or one would be dragged down by its machinery and disappear.'

'Happily, my acquaintance with treadmills, social or otherwise, has not been a very intimate one; but I have always understood that a halt only brings upon the offender a severe shock or wrench—nothing so tragic as death or disappearance. To be sure,' with an exaggerated deference of demeanour, 'I have never moved in the highest circles.'

The sneer struck her so unpleasantly that, loath as she was to offend him, she could not refrain from answering, with an angry flush:

'You considered yourself so far above me and mine in the old days, that you cannot expect me to take this new modesty seriously; yet, if you only came to make satirical remarks——'

'I came because I could not help myself. I have often wished to come before,' he said mendaciously.

'Then why——'

'I have a reputation to maintain. Visits to a lovely widow are sometimes misinterpreted, more especially when she is very young and lives alone.'

He spoke smilingly, but she remembered it was his custom to convey hidden meanings in a jest, and waited for him to continue, while her wrath evaporated slowly.

'You have no companion—not even the pretence of a sheep-dog.'

'I have no one with me at present.'

'You are looking out for someone, perhaps?'

'I—I was a little uncertain what to do. It it is so difficult to hear of anyone altogether desirable.'

As a matter of fact, if the idea had ever entered her head at all, it had not taken root there. She had a great dislike to be overlooked and criticised by any other woman,

more especially one who, albeit in reduced circumstances, would probably possess claims to gentility she had not, and would be likely to find her out in many a mistake. Yet she did not wish him to suppose that she did not know what was required of her, and if it were the correct thing she would do it, however unpalatable to her taste. Besides, had he not hinted that her being alone was a barrier to his seeing her in her own house? and, although choosing to carry matters with a high hand, she knew she was never likely to meet him in the society she frequented.

She looked at him inquiringly.

He was drawing his long fair moustaches thoughtfully through his fingers, and his eyebrows met together in a frown.

'I was speculating as to whether I could not help you in this matter and do an act of charity as well,' he observed presently.

'There is someone you wish to provide

for?' she said archly, but with an acid flavour in her smile.

Mr. Skene could assume an expression of utter stupidity when it suited his purpose, and he now looked so blank that Mrs. Messiter, confident her sudden suspicion was not without foundation, apologized and explained hastily that she had only meant the idlest jest.

'An old friend of mine died lately, and left two daughters unprovided for. I was thinking the older might be precisely the person you require,' he went on, with stolid composure, though the frown on his forehead had perceptibly deepened.

'I should be very glad if it proved to be so. Will you ask her about it, and whatever salary——'

'That would be no great object, I imagine. She wishes to be near her sister, Lady Cairne, who is staying at present with Mrs. Rose in Mount Street.'

'The Honourable Mrs. Rose, Lord Fayrer's daughter?'

He nodded, having mentioned both names with an object, well aware that women of her calibre have the peerage at their finger-tips, and that the fact of Millicent's having any connection with it would ensure for her a more gracious reception should his plan succeed.

'Then you will write to me about it?' said Mrs. Messiter as he rose to go.

'With pleasure. I shall be greatly in your debt if she finds a home with you. It was a lucky chance brought me to you to-day.'

'Give yourself a little of the credit. It is not everyone who has the cleverness to mould chance to his own ends,' she returned in even tones, that perhaps suggested sarcasm only to his guilty conscience.

'I shall hope to see you oftener now the ice is broken,' he replied with unruffled composure.

'You will always be very welcome. I speak for myself; of course, I cannot answer for—your *protégée*,' wickedly. 'Must you really go? It has been so pleasant meeting you again.'

For a moment their glances met. Hers was bright, yet with an underlying tenderness, and it rested on him lingeringly, like a caress.

Oddly enough, the fact that he doubted whether the look were entirely unstudied, and also a scent of white rose that was wafted from her hair, took him back, as nothing else could have done, to the old days when she was perfectly natural, whatever else her shortcomings, and she had loved him honestly, with too little thought for her own interests.

He bent over her hand, and on second thoughts raised it to his lips, it being easier, having fallen into the sweet habit of making love to any woman, to continue doing so than to refrain. Nor did the action seem to displease

her, though she drew her fingers away and blushed. The colour did not soon die away. Long after he had gone she moved restlessly about the room, her hands tightly interclasped, her lips compressed

If he had scored at first, she felt that at last she had secured the advantage. It was only when she was embarrassed at so suddenly confronting the lover of her girlhood that she had been at a loss : when she discovered that he had a motive in seeking her out, she had had self-possession to retaliate, and was sure that some of her shots, though aimed at random, had gone home.

Did he think to pit his wits against hers, and win so easily as he had done seven years before, when a sincere, if foolish, liking had hampered her quite as much as her inexperience, causing her to lose a matrimonial prize which a little diplomacy might have landed ?

'Let him think he has hoodwinked me if he

likes; let him congratulate himself on having arranged everything as he wished; but with opportunity and propinquity every woman has an equal chance; and though this girl may have the best start, it is by no means sure that she will be the first to pass the post. She cannot care for him as I do. She has not my weapons at her command.'

Stopping before a hanging mirror, she surveyed herself with such merciless scrutiny as few women are strong-minded enough to exercise when facing their own reflection. Her features being in repose, the faintest line was discernible, every secret of the toilet was betrayed; yet she by no means wore an expression of despair as she turned away, murmuring to herself:

'Beauty is not everything, and even if it were, I can look as I used to do when I try. Whatever she is like, she cannot afford to despise my rivalry.'

Mark Skene, although he had borne himself with stolid unconcern during this interview, was by no means well satisfied on looking back upon it.

Balancing her lighter sallies against his own ponderous onslaughts, he perforce admitted that he had only come off second-best from the encounter. He guessed that he had gained his end, and was so far content with his morning's work; yet it galled him to think her keen sight had penetrated the thin veil of his deceit, that he would have done better to declare the object of his visit and throw himself upon her charity without circumlocution. As he threaded his way through the mazes of Mayfair, he found himself considering the change the years had wrought in the silly little girl who, with her pretty face and taking ways, had once so nearly entangled him in matrimonial meshes.

He smiled as he thought some of those

ways were very little altered; it was his taste that had matured or been temporarily diverted towards more solid virtues. That trick of lifting her eyes and dropping them suddenly when they met one's gaze, or that other trick he had once found equally soothing to his vanity of waiting breathlessly with parted lips for one's next words to fall, each of these had been practised on him to-day and had left him as indifferent as ever; but he could not deny that once he had been shaken by them, nor that for the first few moments of their meeting his heart had beaten just a little faster. His love for her had been sufficiently sincere, so far as it went, and had no other succeeded it the feeling might have been resuscitated; but now a stronger passion held his soul and kept him impervious to all other women's wiles. Before he reached his club the heroine of that half-forgotten romance was banished from his mind,

and he was only anxious as to his success with his present idol.

To his great delight, Millicent seemed pleased at his having taken so much trouble on her behalf, and entered into a correspondence with every desire to be engaged by the lady she addressed. For one reason, she had had no very alluring offer in answer to her advertisement ; and she was above all things eager to be near Nancy ; so that the proposals eventually made by Mrs. Messiter, in themselves not unhandsome, were immediately accepted, and her preparations hurried on that she might enter upon the new life at once.

Those last few days seemed to fly. She had not known how sorry she would be to go from the place where, after all, she had lived scarcely more than a year, and much of that time had been passed in anxiety and trouble. The enthusiasm with which Brighton inspires

the greater number of its inhabitants seemed also to have infected her, and she felt grieved to leave behind her the brightness of the sunshine and the keen exhilarating air; while the sound of the sea, the roar of the breakers as they swept in upon the low stone piers, she would miss most of all.

The weird music of the sea had soothed her through sleepless nights; its sparkle and its dash had cheered her often when her heart was sad; and the evening before she went away she felt an irresistible impulse to go and bid a last farewell to it, as she might have done to any valued friend.

It was only seven o'clock, but bitterly cold, and quite dark when a mass of hurrying clouds at times obscured the pale light of a crescent moon. As she emerged from the house the girl had to clasp the loose mantle she had hastily thrown on closer about her, and stoop a little as she went, to break the

force of a blustering high wind. For awhile she was sheltered by the double row of houses, with their balconies full of evergreens, or covered with dry tendrils of creepers that would bloom again with spring ; but when she got out of the Square she had to run across the broad road to keep her blood in circulation. She could only stand for a moment leaning against the railings, looking across the sea shining and shimmering like silver far away where the surface seemed comparatively smooth, but rearing its white crests in proud defiance as it neared inland, to fall again in sheets of opalescent foam.

The waves seemed to have gone mad that night, and ran riot in turbulent disorder. First in one direction, then another, they threw themselves violently and sank despondently, spent by their own force, where they met with no resistance. Their fury found vent in wild confused sounds that were

not unmelodious in spite of the almost deafening swell, which now and then culminated in shrill, ear-piercing tones, like the music of the pibroch set to martial strains.

Somehow that ceaseless struggling against all control, that eternal warfare, saddened the quiet watcher with a sense of the futility of all such fighting against fate. Resistance only creating new resistance, was it not better to drift supinely with the tide, asking not, so far as possible caring not, whither? Was it not easier, too?

Wolffe was in her thoughts just then. The last time she had stood here he was with her, full of the courage with which he meant to force his way to the front, his hopes soaring high. She wondered if it had gone well with him, or if his spirits had been already damped by disappointment as hers had been; if he had realized how hard and desperately cruel was the battle of existence.

As the salt air touched her lips, her eyes, and moistened the soft curls about her face, she felt that it was more than saying good-bye to the sea ; it was good-bye to a year of her life as well, and all that it had contained of sorrow and delight.

Of those who had lived together in the little house, brought thither by chance, who had also interwoven one with another the threads of their different destinies, she only was left, and none was so utterly alone as she.

When she turned away from contemplating the broad ocean she was shivering, not entirely from cold ; it was with difficulty she restrained her tears.

CHAPTER XX.

THE NEW LIFE.

Mrs. Scarrot was remaining behind to hand over the house and its contents to the new-comers ; and there was moisture in her pale blue eyes as she watched Millicent put the last touches to her packing the following morning.

'It's a terrible breaking-up,' she said dolefully; 'only to think that a month ago the house was full, and poor Sir Peter alive! And now I'll be by myself.'

'Only for a day or two.'

'I'll come as soon as I can, you may be sure. Give my respects to Miss Nancy—

Lady Cairne I should say—and tell her so. Lord! however she's going to manage a big house puzzles me! She's too "come day, go day, God send Sunday," to get on without help. Now if it had been *you*, Miss Millicent!'

'She will get on much better than I should have done. She is so light-hearted, and riches add to one's cares; they do not always lessen them, you know.'

The charwoman blinked her watery eyes and wore a most superior smile.

'Don't ever listen to such nonsense, miss. Riches help one to bear one's troubles, and as everybody is bound to have their share, it's as well to have so much to the good. I'd a deal rather you were marrying and going to a home of your own, Miss Millicent, even if you *weren't* what they call "in love" with your husband, than going to strangers who know nothing at all about you.'

Millicent did not answer, but her lip quivered a little as she drew in and buckled the last strap of her dressing-bag.

'Some folks say,' went on the old woman garrulously, 'that it's better to *hire* yourself for awhile to a woman than *sell* yourself for a lifetime to a man; but I've never held with that. I've no opinion of womenkind myself. It's not to them I'd go if I wanted anything. Who's the lady you're to live with, Miss Millicent?'

'Her name is Mrs. Messiter.'

There was rather a long pause, and then Mrs. Scarrot asked, in a muffled voice that came from under a big portmanteau she was helping the cabman to hoist on his back, and which sounded very far away, where the lady lived.

'In Curzon Street, Mayfair, not far from where Miss Nancy is in Mount Street.'

'It's a very little world,' was the sole

comment on this; but looking round, Millicent saw that Mrs. Scarrot's face was twitching painfully, and the colour in her cheek came and went in patches.

She had no time to think just then what it was that had so evidently moved her humble friend, but afterwards, as she sat in the train, she recurred to the incident, but could come to no conclusion. Presently her thoughts concentrated themselves on the future into which she was now fairly launched.

Driving from Victoria to Curzon Street, she amused herself by speculating as to what manner of woman this was with whom she was to be thrown; young or old, plain or pretty, and whether she was likely to prove in tastes and pursuits in sympathy with herself.

None of the fancy pictures she had drawn bore the slightest resemblance to the actual person who came forward to meet her, clad in a tea-gown of Oriental materials and

gorgeous hues, bracelets jingling on her wrists, and with a subdued scent of powder and perfume floating about her that caused Millicent to shrink away from her effusive greeting and survey her from a distance with wide-open serious eyes.

Never once had she doubted that Mrs. Messiter would prove a desirable acquaintance. The letters she had received had been well written and tolerably well expressed; moreover, the mere fact of Mr. Skene's knowing her and suggesting they should live together would have stifled any fears to the contrary had they arisen. Now she felt a faint sense of resentment against him, and a little anger with herself for not having made more particular inquiries.

Absently she responded to the overtures which were made to her, and with a cold bow acknowledged the salutation of a tall, dark, foreign-looking man, who was introduced to

her as Count D'Esterre, and who favoured her with a long comprehensive gaze.

Then Mrs. Messiter loosened her wraps, drew a chair for her near the fire, and provided her with a cup of excellent tea, accompanied by dainty rolls of bread and butter, leaving her to enjoy both in peace, and for this unexpected display of tact Millicent was proportionately grateful.

When she had thawed a little, and was revived by the hot tea, she had leisure to look round, and in so doing was able to gather something more as to her new surroundings. A mellow light was sparingly diffused from lamps shaded with red or orange silk; the soft curtains were drawn closely across the windows, though it was not yet dark outside; the room was made comfortable with low luxurious seats and small adjacent tables; while a divan was arranged in one corner of the room under a huge Japanese umbrella,

from which hung an Eastern-looking lantern. The mistress of the house lounged on some big Turkish cushions before the fire, shading her face from the flames with a crimson feather screen.

She was talking to the Count with a vivacity that somehow jarred on Millicent's fastidious taste, though her voice was not unmelodious, and all she said was bright and mirth-evoking ; so that several times, in spite of herself, a smile flitted across the girl's mouth and softened its severe expression.

Now and then she was addressed by name, but as she answered only in monosyllables, the attempt to draw her into the conversation was at last relinquished ; and she might have supposed they had forgotten all about her, only that every time she glanced in their direction she encountered the bold dark eyes of the foreigner fixed upon her. Soon the heat of the room became so oppressive, and the

odour from some hothouse flowers that stood in a bowl beside her so stifling, that she stood up, moving forward a little blindly, and murmuring something indistinctly.

Mrs. Messiter rose to her feet, and went to her in friendly haste.

'You are tired, and must rest in your own room till dinner. I will go with you to see there is a fire and everything you want.'

Out in the cool passages Millicent breathed more freely, and when at last she was alone she began to wonder whether she had not been too critical, too difficult to please.

That her employer meant to be most kind was evident; and if she were not the sort of woman to whom she had hitherto been accustomed, she was not actually vulgar, or, to judge by her conversation, uneducated. That art had been called to the aid of nature in the case of her personal appearance was, she understood, a common fault, and one she her-

self was likely too harshly to condemn, being in her first youth, and at present beyond temptation.

What had struck her most unpleasantly was the tone of Mrs. Messiter's surroundings —a certain something she could not describe, yet vehemently disliked. Now in retrospection this became vague, and was perhaps imaginary altogether, though at the time it had seemed very real. To her fresh, wholesome taste there was something actually repulsive in the heavy atmosphere of the room downstairs, and in its dim, modulated lights. Even here she thought a sickly sweet perfume lingered where Mrs. Messiter had been, and she threw open the window and took off the shade of a lamp that stood upon her writing-table, throwing it impatiently to one side.

There was relief in even this slight vent to her feelings.

Then a sudden reaction—or perhaps it was the cold, biting wind that swept through the room — caused her to reclose the window sharply. Taking a chair by the fire, she set herself to solve the problem before her.

After all, was she not absurdly exaggerating the importance of trifles that had distressed her? Being tired and overstrung, was she not inclined to view everything with a prejudiced eye?

Disagreeables of some sort she must expect. Were these the worst she could encounter? Would she better herself by a change? Where could she go during the interval that must elapse before she was better suited, since she was resolute not to benefit by the fortune that should have gone to Leslie Wolffe.

Two or three slow tears fell from her eyes as she realized her utter friendlessness, and for a few moments the bright tongues of flame that darted up the chimney seemed blurred

and forked like lightning ; then the moisture was resolutely dashed away. She was not given to weeping, and that her own trouble had on this occasion moved her made it seem to her a more unworthy weakness.

At the same moment she heard footsteps outside, and a clear young voice saying blithely : ' You need not tell her. I am her sister ; she expects me ;' and before Millicent could move, Nancy's arms were round her neck and Nancy's cool, fresh kisses pattered down on her like April rain.

' You *did* expect me, of course ?' she said presently, with some suspicion in her tone.

' I had not thought——'

' That's because you are so accustomed to looking after yourself as well as me. You don't realize the tables are turned—that it is I who should take the burden on my shoulders now. I am a married woman ; to all intents and purposes I am double your years in age—

perhaps treble them in importance. Why, I could chaperone you to a dance.'

'You look equal to anything,' with a little loving smile.

Nancy drew backward a few steps, and surveyed her sable garments with amusing self-complacency.

'I thought you would be impressed,' she said.

'I think you are most magnificent. Turn round slowly, and let me view you from every side. Oh, Nancy!' as her request was willingly complied with, '*what* a coat!'

'Yes, is it not superb? I don't think I dare tell you what it cost. To salve it to my conscience I turn it inside out whenever I get a chance, that its full value may be extracted.' She drew it off as she spoke, and crumpled the rich violet silk lining in her fingers.

Millicent bestowed on the coat all the admiration it was calculated to excite.

'Do you remember,' she asked, 'how it was once your great ambition to wear nothing but silk clothing under an ordinary woollen gown, that you might possess the proud consciousness of having spent a lot of money without succumbing to the vulgar vice of ostentation?'

Nancy swayed from one foot to another, evidently enjoying the soft *frou-frou* the rhythmical movement provoked; then she thought it necessary to assume a *blasé* look and manner.

'It is all Dead Sea fruit,' she sighed.

'And you are getting tired of the taste of dust and ashes. Tell me all about it, Nancy —all about your new possessions and your wonderful doings since you left Brighton.'

Sitting down in a favourite attitude on the floor, her hat thrown aside, her bright hair resting on the dark fur coat that hung across a chair, Nancy recounted her adventures with spirit, and made her sister smile more than

once as she described her inability to grasp her acquired wealth and importance at first.

They both laughed outright as a purse bulging with notes and gold was produced with pride, for it was notorious that Nancy never could be trusted with sixpence, being certain to lay it down and forget it, so that if it were not lost or stolen the fact said more for the honesty of those about the sisters than for her own good management or care.

'Colonel Fayrer looked so—so superior when I hinted I had better not have too much at a time, that I was ashamed to say anything more, and took it meekly. He has rather an unenviable knack of appearing more virtuous than anybody else, and when he stares at you through that eyeglass, you feel as if all the dark secrets of your soul were laid bare before him.'

'I never doubted his wisdom or his good-

ness, but I never thought either aggressively displayed.'

'Because you are good and wise yourself; the gulf between you does not yawn so widely. As for me, I might toil after you both for ever and never catch you up, never be in the same class with you;' she recklessly mixed her metaphors. 'Even his sister says he is the most perfect man she ever met, and, oh! Millie, what *do* you think she calls him?'

'Sir Galahad, perhaps,' remembering a former conversation.

'That's a very good guess. It *is* a Knight of the Round Table. It is that flower of them all, the very pink of chivalry himself, with whom he dares comparison—Lancelot, the glorious—the faulty, the *human*.'

'Perhaps it is his real name.'

'Then his godfathers and godmothers must have been woefully wanting in prescience.

If he is like Sir Lancelot at all, it is Sir Lancelot after he lost the Queen, with all the life, the spirit, and the wickedness crushed out of him.'

'Why do you dislike him so?' asked her sister, smiling at the *naïveté* with which the third quality was placed in conjunction with the other two.

'I don't dislike him, but he somehow always makes me dislike myself, and then, out of revenge, I dare say, I try to make him appear absurd and small.'

'You don't succeed in this instance. *I* admire him immensely. I think him good-looking as well as good.'

Nancy made a face, and balanced her purse upon her finger-tips.

'I wish,' she said in a low voice that was also very persuasive—'I wish you would ease me of this burden. I should be so happy if you would take it.'

Millicent shook her head, laying her hand lightly on the soft curled hair, and stroking it tenderly to take all sting out of the refusal; but Nancy eluded her touch and sprang impatiently to her feet.

Though Millicent had never expressed any opinion about what had happened during her absence at the critical time, it had always been felt that she disapproved, and her sister was convinced that had she been in the same position the result would not have been the same; that under no circumstances would she have touched this fortune. Jaynes, or any undeserving society, might have had it, but her own integrity would have remained unshaken, her fingers unsoiled by contact with what was in effect ill-gotten gold. Sometimes Nancy comforted herself by the reflection that she had acted for the best, and that in the alternative cases the money would have gone utterly beyond the rightful owner's

reach ; but this argument she felt was uncandid in its nature, and it was never consciously encouraged.

'Why can't you let me forget for a moment!' she burst out passionately. 'Do you think it is very pleasant to be branded as a sort of thief, a receiver of stolen goods? I don't want the money. I fling it away right and left. I should like to renounce it altogether.'

'You are talking nonsense, child. Having married Sir Peter, you have a right to some of it.'

'But not all. If he would take half, even!'

'He never will. And he said—don't you remember, Nancy?—that he was glad you had it rather than any other.'

'I know, I know,' she answered softly, with bowed head.

'And Sir Peter was so fond of you. He wished you to be happy.'

'Colonel Fayrer warned me once that money was often a bar to happiness, and I am afraid he was very right. It stifles affection, too. I was as fond of Sir Peter as he was of me once, but since that day he first told me his intention of leaving his fortune to me I have never felt the same. I cannot forgive him his cruelty to—to his wife's son. He was cruel to me, too. He has spoilt everything,' she said with a pitiful quivering of her lips.

'Yet he meant to be most kind.'

'I tell myself so over and over again; but it's no use. I can't think of him as he was when he first came to Marine Square: gentle, courteous, and always sympathetic: I must think of him as I saw him last: revengeful, and determined to have his own way whatever happened. Do you think I would have refused to go into mourning for him if he had never changed? It is the

Sir Peter Cairne who forced himself into the position of my benefactor, who enriched me at the expense of someone else, I can't *pretend* to regret.'

She looked up defiantly and threw one arm across the violet lining of her coat, which was turned outward as though challenging attention.

Millicent had noticed the departure into colours, but had made no comment, and now was glad she had refrained, understanding that pain and futile rebellion against fate had urged Nancy to this rather feeble protest.

'There is so much good you can do with all that money,' she said by-and-by.

'All the distress I see I try to relieve. Sometimes Colonel Fayrer has shown me where help was needed, and I did what I could ; but the distress is so great, and sometimes it is not only *money* that is wanted.

Then I am quite powerless,' said Nancy humbly.

Millicent put her arms around her and kissed her tenderly, not speaking for awhile.

'Just to see your sweet bright face would do most people good. It has comforted me already, and I was very miserable when you came,' she confessed at last, and then suffered the whole story of her doubts and fears to be drawn from her, aware that they sounded puerile and inadequate when put into plain words.

'I saw Mrs. Messiter before I came upstairs, and thought she seemed so nice and kind,' Nancy observed at the conclusion.

'She was very good to me indeed. It is only——'

'That she uses powder and "makes up." Everybody does paint or powder or dye nowadays,' said Nancy with an affectation of

tolerance for these and all other fashionable follies.

'I hope you will never do it, Nancy.'

'I don't require it yet, so must not answer for my firmness under temptation. Somehow I have an idea that I am no better than other people, that where they do wrong I might not do any better, so I am afraid to boast.'

'You mean that I am too severe, too narrow-minded.'

'I mean that you are an angel, Millie. We are none of us fit to touch the ground that you fly over. To make the best of ourselves is a duty we owe to society, Mrs. Rose says; and she is *charming*, although she does use just a little powder. I am sure you will like her.'

'I shall hate her if she spoils *you*.'

'Don't be so vicious, Millie; I assure you I am in no danger. She gives me the best advice always. It is my maid who tries to incul-

cate pernicious doctrines. She asks me where I keep my glycerine of cucumbers, I think she calls it (it may be melons), and what I generally "use for my hair." She speaks with gentle sorrow of my "fresh" complexion, and recommended me to use baths of dry bran to tone it down. No, I did *not*'—this was in answer to Millicent's look of amused inquiry—'I should have felt like a *doll* turned *inside out*.'

'Such heights of civilization appal me,' said Millicent; then added in a lower voice: 'Have you heard anything of Mr. Wolffe? Has he come to see you?'

'No. Why do you ask?' Nancy was now getting into her coat.

'Because he said you should be the first to hear if he succeeded with his painting, and I should like to know.'

Nancy's face was crimson, and her eyes shone like stars.

'I will tell you when I hear,' she murmured, and with a hurried 'Good-bye' ran off.

Not until she was at the hall-door did she remember that one thing she had particularly wished to say had been left unsaid; but as she turned to go upstairs again Mrs. Messiter came out of the dining-room.

'Have you forgotten anything? is it anything I can do for you?' she asked pleasantly.

'It was a question I promised to ask my sister, but it referred to you. It was about a man-servant who was with Sir Peter Cairne for some years, and is looking for another place. Do you happen to want a good man-servant, Mrs. Messiter?'

It suddenly struck the widow that she did, though the faults of the one who was with her then might not have appeared so many or so glaring had she not wished to ingratiate herself with her new acquaintance.

She asked a few questions as a matter of

form, also to prolong the interview, and the circumstances of the case were explained to her.

'I don't think he was treated fairly at all, and I would take him into my own service; but my housekeeper does not get on with him. I believe him to be an excellent servant,' said little Lady Cairne in her grandest manner.

Colonel Fayrer had not considered it necessary to tell her all that was written of Jaynes in the will; she only knew he had been left without a legacy, and she spoke in all good faith.

So Jaynes found himself provided with a place, not altogether to the satisfaction of Millicent, who started, and experienced an unaccountable sensation of repulsion when that same evening the news was told her. Believing that he had passed out of their lives altogether, she did not relish the idea of his turning up again; moreover, she had always

disliked and distrusted him. It seemed a bad omen for her happiness, she thought, that Jaynes should again be under the same roof with her.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WOMAN WITH A STORY.

The woman who met Nancy at her journey's end was exceptional in every way—both in appearance and character unlike anyone she had met before. Not in the least good-looking, she had the air of one who had always been considered so, and carried herself in a way that set off and drew attention to a superb figure. On this account she looked taller than she really was, and her manner had the self-possession of those who have moved much in society and travelled in various portions of the globe. She was accustomed to hold her own position wherever she might

find herself; and although she said laughingly, adopting a current phrase, that she was 'the same age as everybody else,' as a matter of fact she was just a little younger. Her rather large features did not, however, readily lend themselves to the effect of youth, nor was she anxious to assume it, vanity being a foible to which she had never had occasion to plead guilty. Having always been her own most merciless critic, she had been wont to declare this a fatal flaw, and that it proved her to be unwomanly; while, if any further evidence were needed to fasten that crime upon her, she confessed it was a want of curiosity, 'which surely,' she would say ruefully, 'in one of my sex argues lack of sympathy.' Certainly, if to be womanly means—as it so often does—to be weak, it was a true bill she had brought against herself; for she had never yet been known to give way when it was her duty to stand firm,

or to commit a folly for want of due reflection, and this, considering that her life had been lived in the full glare of a publicity which she had never seemed to shirk, was saying a great deal.

What had been her own private experience no one knew; for, possessing many friends, she made no confidences; from this it might be inferred she had none to make, since most women find their own secrets the most difficult to keep. Yet that her strength of character was not linked with heartlessness the most careless observer might have judged, looking into the great hazel eyes, which, uplifted slowly, seemed to pierce your very soul. Her complexion was sallow, like her brother's, but the use of some innocuous powder made this fact less apparent; while from her low brow a mass of pale-brown wavy hair was drawn back loosely and arranged in plaits. Her cast of countenance was Egyptian, its expression

always darkly mysterious, save when the sudden flash from her eyes illumined it and aroused the more interest that these flashes were rare. 'Sphinx' was her brother's name for her, and by no means an inappropriate one.

Ten years before, the Honourable Caroline Fayrer had made her *début*, and during her first season married a man some years her senior, a captain in a crack regiment of cavalry. If the match was not a good one, it could not be called actually bad; for the captain had a fair income, and possessed interest in the right quarters. Caroline had no mother, and her father, anxious only for her happiness, understood too little of woman's nature to question whether she was taking the best means to secure it. Captain Rose was good-looking; he excelled in all manly exercises, and was desperately in love with Mr. Fayrer's daughter; nothing more was to be desired; nor was the girl herself aware that more

might be needed. If she felt a vague disappointment at times, a sense of incompleteness in moments which should have been all ecstasy, she had sufficient philosophy to explain the fact away, and not to be seriously disturbed by it.

Had not Tennyson himself, who was her authority on these subjects at this stage of her career, written :

> 'Woman is the lesser man, and all thy passions, matched with mine,
> Are as moonlight unto sunlight, or as water unto wine'?

She could not expect to be so much in love as he. Of all the men she had met, he pleased her best ; and they had so many tastes in common, and there was so much excitement in her life just then, she never paused to question her heart whether it were not possible she might meet some one she liked better—perhaps she never fully realized she had a heart at all. Knowing nothing of what marriage means, never dreaming of the

responsibilities they are taking on themselves from which they can never again be free, so many women deliberately, it would seem, put all fears from them, and recklessly bandaging their eyes, because they are afraid to look before them, go up to the altar and swear oaths whose significance would certainly deter them from so irrevocable a step *if they understood.* Pity it is this blindness cannot last—that the day must dawn when, in spite of all endeavour, they are forced to see. Love comes to all. In how many cases does it come too late? how often in the form of a temptation, and not as a delight that may innocently be enjoyed? The evil is apparent; the remedy, if remedy there be, has not yet been found, and, it may be, never will, since the curse laid on women at the Fall has never been withdrawn; and all Eve's daughters are born to sorrow so long as the Angel who holds the flaming sword guards the gate to Paradise.

For six or seven years Mrs. Rose lived on the best terms with her husband so far as the outside world could discern ; then, when a new Viceroy went out to India, Captain Rose accompanied him as his aide-de-camp, and it was a subject for nine days' wonderment that he went alone.

Two boys scarcely old enough to be at school might have been sufficient excuse for his wife's remaining behind, had excuse been needed ; and India, it is generally admitted, has an unhealthy climate which it is advisable a woman should not brave unless actually obliged ; but neither reason was considered to have sufficient weight by those who are always eager to discover a motive for the simplest act.

Moreover, it was agreed that if either of these causes prevented his wife from going, Desmond Rose would have done well to have also remained at home, since they were too well

off for such a separation to be necessitated by any financial consideration. Had Mrs. Rose given any cause for scandal, it would have been brought up against her now ; but her conduct had always been the most discreet, and though at first she was viewed with suspicion as one of that much-abused section of society known as grass-widows, after awhile this vigilance relaxed, and she was suffered to go her own way without more comment. In truth, although exceedingly clever, she was too slow-witted ever to have been an adept in flirtation even had her tastes pointed in that direction ; and she was also too serious-minded to play with her emotions as some women do, until too late they discover they have trifled with edged tools, and must bear marks of a cruel wound for ever. That at some period she had passed through an unhappy experience was the general impression, but no man's name had ever been mentioned

in connection with hers, and she was always so efficiently chaperoned by her father and her brother, that none had ventured to openly conjecture what they could not know.

When Nancy arrived in Mount Street, Mrs. Rose advanced to meet her with her usual rather cold composure ; but something in the small white face, looking just then most pitiable and forlorn, at once touched her heart, and she bent down and kissed her cheek. Nancy was too impulsive not to reciprocate her warmth, and the friendship to which they in a manner pledged themselves was never broken. Colonel Fayrer was well pleased at the turn affairs had taken. When Nancy had gone to dress for dinner he turned to his sister with rather more than his ordinary military preciseness of demeanour, though there was an expression in his face she was quick to see and understand.

'Is she what you expected?'

'Not quite, I am glad to say. I have no taste for angelic qualities, superhuman virtues. "Perfection is in fragments; piece them all and make a monster," someone says.'

'I never described her as perfection.'

'Did you not by implication? I assure you I had some grave doubts as to my wisdom in receiving her, for I knew I should be bored to death by wings and a seraphic smile. However, my fears are set at rest. If I am any judge of character at all, little Lady Cairne is no angel.'

'She is as good as gold.'

'With a wholesome proportion of alloy. Pure gold is practically useless, you know; it won't stand wear and tear.'

Colonel Fayrer looked down thoughtfully at his boots some time before replying. Once or twice he lifted his head as though to speak, then appeared to change his mind, and while he pondered the matter over Mrs. Rose came

up and stood beside him, presently laying her hand on the lapel of his coat to secure his attention.

'What is it, Lance, that is vexing you?'

No one could have doubted, who saw her then, the depth of her feelings or their strength: her eyes were brimful of love and sympathy as they rested on his face; her very attitude as she leant against him had the action of a caress. It induced him to say more than he might otherwise have done, being always most reserved of speech and inclined to ignore, so far as it was possible, his own emotions.

'I am sorry for that child. She has troubles before her, and has suffered already, if I do not mistake. Women will hate her because she has wit and wealth, as well as beauty; and men—will *not* hate her.'

'That, perhaps, is the worst misfortune she has to dread. As to what you say

about women, that is too trite an error to be contradicted. We appreciate each others' attractions more thoroughly than could any man. Our admiration is also better worth the having.'

'While the first tribute that is forthcoming, jealousy, is of course the highest compliment you could pay.'

He was laughing in a quiet way that ruffled her temper and caused her to return sharply:

'We are never jealous of a nice woman—one who uses legitimate weapons and wins in a fair fight. If we do not always agree with you as to what constitutes niceness, it is because *your* taste is at fault — not *ours*. Either you lack our delicacy of intuition or you deliberately choose the baser metal.'

'Which just now you assured me wore the best.'

'That has nothing to do with it,' she said, with a woman's disdainful way of closing a dis-

cussion when she is getting the worst of it, a device that makes her invincible in argument.

'Are you going to give me any instructions as to my duties as chaperon?' she asked presently, looking purposely in an opposite direction.

'You might as well ask me for my views as to the management of a nursery. I know nothing about young ladies, their ways and customs.'

'But you are willing to learn. What is the good of trying to deceive me, Lancelot? Do you think I don't see that you are infatuated with this quasi-widow, and that I shall be doing my duty as a sister if in any way I can further your interests. To do this most effectually I ought, of course, to abuse you, or else never mention you at all, though to such a pitch of wisdom I should find it very difficult to harden my heart.'

Colonel Fayrer muttered something under

his moustache, and fixed his glass more fiercely in his eye in an effort to convince her of his utter indifference—an effort which she met with an amused smile, shaking her head at the same time with aggravating meaning in the movement.

'It won't do, Lance. You may screw up your face as much as you like; you can't screw all feeling out of it. The very first time you mentioned her to me I guessed how it was. I *know* it now.'

'I am old enough to be her father,' in feeble expostulation.

'You are thirty-six next birthday.'

'There are a dozen other men she will meet whom she must prefer.'

'I shall take care she does *not* meet them.'

Removing his eyeglass, Colonel Fayrer first wiped it carefully, then dropped it in his pocket. Without it he looked younger, his features gained in character. In his regiment

it was always considered a danger-signal when this invariable companion, which acted somewhat as a mask, was set aside, with his society manners and a certain insouciance which was also only assumed, and the real man revealed himself — determined, eager, possessing the courage of his strong opinions as to right or wrong. Such an expression as was on his face now had been there when he led a mixed corps into action at Tel-el-Kebir, and not a man would have refused to follow where he led, though it had been into the very jaws of Death.

His sister was too near to look directly into his eyes, and judge from them and his set lips how serious was his mood ; but the light, firm grasp of his hand upon her shoulder, the significance of the pause before his reply, prepared her in some degree for what was coming.

'Listen to me,' he said quietly. 'I won't

say you have guessed wrongly. I am not ashamed of caring for her. Perhaps it is a subject for self-congratulation that in spite of all the knocking about I have had, and one or two undesirable experiences, I am still capable of so fresh and pure a feeling. But remember, if I am Lady Cairne's lover, I am also her trustee. She is, in a manner, in my charge, and her interests I shall always consider, not my own. That she will marry is a matter of course ; even without her fortune there would be no lack of admirers for such a lovely face. I will take my chance with the rest of them. Above all things, I wish for her happiness. Help her to that, and you help me.'

'If she chose wisely she would choose you.'

'No doubt. But love is blind, you see ; and from time immemorial the nice deserving old man has been rejected in favour of a handsome, worthless, and otherwise delightful

youngster, who perhaps never rightly values the prize his demerits have won for him.'

'If she knew half of what I have seen she would not hesitate. She would down on her knees and thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love.'

'It is a happy dispensation of Providence that experience is an acquisition of later life, and cannot destroy any of the gilt on the gingerbread of our youth. As to "good men"—supposing, for the sake of argument, that the description fits myself—do you think your sex ever appreciates "good men"?'

The remark was scarcely put in the form of a question, nor did Mrs. Rose regard it as one. She had lapsed into silence, and, with her arms resting on the mantelpiece, was gazing earnestly into the fire. The train of thought into which she had fallen he had also followed, it seemed, for he said presently, not conscious that he betrayed the fact that he

had done so, and therefore by implication seemed to blame her :

'There is a report in the clubs that the Viceroy is resigning. The climate does not suit him is the reason given, but doubtless it would be a matter of politics as well. Have you any better information?'

'I—I have not heard from Desmond very lately.'

'Of course, if it were so, Desmond would come home. He would not remain with any new Viceroy that was appointed.'

'That would depend on circumstances, I suppose. If he likes India——'

'If ever any man merited that opprobrious epithet "good," it is your husband, Carry. I don't suppose he ever consults his own tastes at all where your happiness is concerned. If he remained in India it would be not because he liked the country, but

because *you liked him to be away from you.* I am speaking very plainly—more plainly than I ought to do, perhaps.'

'I dare say that I should be grateful that you have never said so much before,' she answered, with a trace of acrimony in her tones. Passionately proud, to no one else would she have allowed the right to interfere, but he had earned the privilege he asserted by a silence of three years, during which time he had never even suffered her to see that he thought there was anything unusual in the fact of her living apart from her husband. That he deemed it necessary to speak now at once arrested her attention, and she waited a little anxiously for what he had still to say.

'People will talk, you know, and women cannot afford to give them any cause for gossip. Rose is sufficiently well off not to be obliged to go in for foreign service; if

he had hankered after an aide-de-camp-ship he could get one nearer home, where you and the children could be with him. His friendship with Lord A—— explained his going out to India in the first instance; but if he remains there now under another man, there will be more room for speculation, your name will be dragged in, and I think you cannot escape censure.'

'Why should they discuss us at all?' impatiently.

Colonel Fayrer shrugged his shoulders. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was nearing the dinner hour, and prepared to depart.

'I don't mean that they can have anything actually against you. I only warn you that a woman openly separated from her husband must be ready to run the gauntlet of public opinion. It is possible that you

may be considered more sinned against than sinning in the matter ; you might even attitudinize as a martyr and command pity —if such pity be worth the having.'

'I think I will dispense with it, pity being always nearer to contempt than love. I only wish to be let alone, to be allowed some privacy in my life. I have no desire at all to pose as "a woman with a story."'

There is, however, no law to restrain the liberty of thought, or even its expression, so long as this is kept within due limits, not in writing or, worse still, in print. It is difficult for anyone to escape comment in an age when considerable license of speech is permitted, and swords no longer flash forth from their scabbards at an aspersion on any woman's fair fame.

Caroline Rose was too remarkable to go utterly unscathed, however carefully she might have regulated her actions by the

rules prescribed by society. Not even the fact that she had never been known to say anything against another woman told much to her advantage, since it is a worldly-wise maxim that people in glass houses should not be so indiscreet as to amuse themselves by stone-throwing ; also there was a wistfulness in her expression, and oftentimes a pathos in her voice, that precluded the idea that she was very happy ; while misery too often presupposes guilt.

Nancy noticed this at once, and after a week's acquaintance, with that impulsiveness which always characterized her speech no less than her actions, she asked in mock despair :

'What is it, I wonder, about you, that makes it such a vulgar thing to be too young, too strong, or in too good spirits ?'

Mrs. Rose laughed outright, and suggested she would not easily find anyone to share

such vitiated tastes; but Nancy persisted in her opinion.

'You have something that no one else I ever met has got, except perhaps Millicent.'

'And she, with those three valuable adjuncts you affect to despise, is irresistible, of course.'

'I think you would call her that. It is just the term that best expresses her. But even she has not quite your knack of riveting everyone's attention. I don't know how to explain myself; but it seems to me that when you speak one is always waiting to understand why; and whenever you move one watches you to discover what your object is in moving. I think it has grown clearer now in trying to make it clear to you. I think it must be that you are intensely interesting.'

'That is not a quality I should desire for anyone I loved,' said Mrs. Rose slowly,

thinking of her conversation with her brother, the remembrance of which had not ceased to disturb her.

'Oh!' cried Nancy enthusiastically, 'I would give anything for that charm of yours — to smile slowly, or not smile at all; to glide about a room wrapped in a soft cloud of gloom.'

'Not my only clothing, I would wish it to be understood,' was interpolated gravely.

'You may laugh as much as you please, but the fact remains that it is adorable to look as you do; pensive and—well, just a little resigned, as if you had had a great misfortune and had borne it beautifully.'

'What makes you think I have *not* had a great misfortune?' this she said bending over her work and putting in an unimportant stitch with great deliberation.

'Facts speak for themselves,' returned Nancy in evident surprise. 'You have

everything a woman could desire ; a charming house, plenty of friends, money, and, chief of all, a nice husband and two darling little boys.'

Mrs. Rose smiled rather drearily.

'My blessings, now you enumerate them, are verily in goodly number. All the same, I must beg to remind your little ladyship that there may be complications and crooked corners in life as yet happily not dreamt of in your comfortable philosophy. Remember the old proverb as to the necessity of suffering before you can be beautiful ; and take my word for it, that one might find other more doubtful advantages very costly. As for the privilege of being considered *interesting*, I don't think you need wish for it—not at the price I have paid.'

CHAPTER XXII.

INSPIRATION.

It is rare enough to make much way in anything at the first attempt, more especially, perhaps, in art, where so broad a line separates the amateur from the professional artist, where it is also necessary to possess some sort of reputation to command a sale, although it is indeed true in most cases that nothing succeeds like success.

Wolffe found it a different matter now that he wished his paintings to be purchased, from what it was when they were offered to friends as presents. Then they had been received with enthusiasm, and praised with

what he recognised as amiable exaggeration; now, when he was trying to persuade dealers to buy, he could only hope that the remarks made upon them were equally untrustworthy, being conceived in a tradesman-like spirit. Sometimes, after listening patiently to these preliminary depreciations, he would sell some sketches at a few shillings apiece; but oftener he was told that the market was overstocked, and that it was difficult to find a sale even for works by well-known artists.

It became evident to Wolffe after awhile that his only chance was to make a name; and to do this he must not any longer waste his time, and such ability as he possessed, on pot-boilers, but set about some big picture that might be accepted at one of the galleries, where, if it attracted any attention, the rest might be made easier. Two or three small pictures had been exhibited during the last few years, more, he was beginning to believe,

on account of his personal acquaintance with some eminent R.A.'s than from any merit of their own ; but these had always passed unnoticed, and had generally been purchased by people who knew him, and simply because they knew him.

He had many friends who could, and doubtless would, have helped him now, but he was too proud to apply for aid ; and to those he met from time to time he never hinted of his troubles. They had heard, of course, that he had been disinherited, the story of the deathbed marriage having been pretty generally discussed, but they had no conception of the poverty to which he was now reduced, while, even if they had been aware of the truth, Wolffe would have indignantly refused all offers of assistance.

To paint a picture that should command criticism was obviously his best chance of gaining a footing on the ladder which, he

trusted, would bear him to the topmost heights: more than once he thought regretfully of that 'Fair and Flying Fate' which he believed he might have confidently counted to help towards fame.

To paint another equally good picture might have seemed easy; but he had always worked in the most desultory fashion, and trusted entirely to inspiration, which now, at the supremest moment, failed him. The very necessity that he should do something, and that quickly, hampered his ideas, and robbed them of all freshness and originality. No subject that suggested itself pleased him, and when he began in desperation to work against the grain, and make what he could of the one that seemed to possess most possibilities, devoting many hours a day to it, in spite of his distaste, he found the efforts led to no good result, and that the progress he made was only mechanical, in no sense satisfactory.

And all the time his capital was steadily decreasing. Notwithstanding his struggles to keep his expenses within most modest bounds, very soon there would be absolutely nothing left between him and actual necessity.

This horrible dread, growing more appalling with its near approach, paralyzed his energies. He lost all self-confidence, and was more than half inclined to believe he had made a mistake in his choice of a profession, and that it would be advisable to make other plans before he became reduced to utter destitution. This anxiety still further told on him, and his lack of nerve-force soon became apparent in the smaller studies he completed from time to time—all of which were rejected —a fact that did not tend to raise his courage.

He had taken some rooms in Ladbroke Grove, where he could get a larger studio for less money than he had paid in the more

fashionable neighbourhood of South Kensington, and with a very small outlay he managed to make it look pretty, as his taste was good, and he had all the articles of luxury he had collected in prosperous days to eke out his later more modest purchases.

But even this unpretentious establishment he should very soon be compelled to give up, if nothing intervened in his favour.

He was growing worn and haggard-looking, and was on the verge of breaking down altogether, when at last what was needed came, and imbued him with renewed hope.

Finding it impossible to accomplish anything satisfactory while in this unsettled state, he had fallen into the habit of wandering about the streets—sometimes quite aimlessly, the perturbed state of his mind rendering exercise imperative—and at others looking about eagerly for something, *anything*, that would convey to him a motive for

a picture at whose production he could labour *con amore*. By daylight, and by gaslight, these perambulatory fits seized him, and took him miles in various directions—out in the country, where it was bleak, still, and unbeautiful, the leafless trees rustling mournfully as the cold winds swept through their branches, and a general air of lonely emptiness prevailing ; or into the very heart of the East-End, where the lack of loveliness was from another cause, and more painfully apparent.

But always—perhaps because his brain was preoccupied and dulled to outside impression —he returned from these expeditions as far as ever from the object he had in view ; and one night, feeling that if he brooded any longer over his difficulties he should go mad, he turned into a theatre in the Strand for a little mental relaxation.

It was late — the play having already

reached its second act — when he entered, and for some time he leant listlessly against the wall watching the action on the stage, trying to make out what was its intention. Not until the curtain fell did he look about him, and almost the first object on which his gaze rested was a private box nearly opposite. At first he only saw a lady sitting in front, in a very striking costume, with a manner quite as remarkable. She was talking to two men who bent over her, with more impressiveness than was consistent with good taste, but whose attentions appeared to please, judging by the animated glances which rewarded them.

Pretty she certainly was, in a faded, rather dishevelled fashion; but there was nothing that would have arrested the artist's passing glance had she not bent backward to address someone who sat in the shade of a heavy velvet curtain, but who moved forward to respond.

A pale face he remembered well—a face that had haunted him persistently in dreams as well as in every waking hour—paler than he had seen it last on the Parade at Brighton, but otherwise unchanged except that surely it was sadder, and the sensitive lips, which betrayed every thought as it passed through her mind, were proudly compressed, though they parted in a faint smile as she spoke.

Again, this time more keenly, he scrutinized her surroundings, and detected at once that they were what is broadly known as second-class. The woman herself, though not actually unlady-like in appearance, was devoid of that good breeding which shows itself through any surface affectation. As for the men—Wolffe recognised one of them and knew him to be a foreign adventurer, who had ingratiated himself with a certain set, but had no claim to be considered actually 'in society'; the

other, though scrupulously well dressed and buttonholed according to the latest fiat, was, if Wolffe's discrimination was not absolutely at fault, lacking in refinement, or else did not consider it needful to be on his best behaviour.

He understood now why Millicent's expression had been so eloquent of pained distaste; why, when she was no longer actually addressed, she turned away with an air of relief.

Looking down at her, even from such a distance, he could discern that the scarcely modulated laughter jarred upon her, and that she shrank from the notice it drew in their direction; while even less palatable seemed the conversation of the foreigner before alluded to, whose undisguised admiration filled the onlooker with jealous wrath. When the curtain rose again, and, indeed, all throughout the last act, Wolffe could not

withdraw his eyes from what so fascinated them. Nothing on the stage distracted his attention for a moment. Always he saw that slim, girlish figure in simple white, as striking a contrast to the gorgeous gown of the elder woman as the sweet innocence of her expression was to that other face—not actually bad or bold, but bearing unmistakable impress of having eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In the dimly-lighted box Millicent's face was like a flower that rears its delicate blossom amidst almost impenetrable gloom, its fairness shown up against the sombre background and deep crimson hangings, and more noticeable on account of the dark visage that remained persistently so near her own, in spite of the disdain with which all endeavours to interest or amuse her were met. It was a source of considerable satisfaction to Wolffe that when the performance

was over, and they left the theatre, it was not to Millicent he offered his arm, but to the other woman, who had seemed by a gesture to claim that courtesy.

Before he could get to the entrance the ladies had driven off, and the three men who had seen them into their carriage were standing in the full glare of an electric light preparing to smoke.

He heard one or two phrases as he passed that still further ruffled his equanimity.

'Better give up the pursuit, D'Esterre. She is not your sort.'

'It is the desire of the moth for the star,' put in a second speaker languidly.

The Count looked thoughtfully at the glowing end of his cigar before buttoning his coat tightly across his chest.

'If I wished to continue the simile, I might retort that such a phenomenon has been known in nature as a *falling* star. But I

assure you I am not so much interested as you think. My eye is on the *main chance*, however it may seem to rove.'

'The widow is too rich and too pretty to stand any trifling, I should say.'

'When a woman is in love there is nothing she will not stand. Dieu, how cold it is! Shall we walk, or take a hansom to the club?'

On the whole, the artist was not sorry he had been impelled to linger for a moment, among the crowd that was slowly streaming out, to hear what was said.

His mind was relieved on one subject, for he knew enough about the Count to be sure that nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of his own interests, and that Millicent was secured from any serious persecutions. What had brought her into such company he could not guess, as he still believed her to be living with her sister,

beyond reach of want, and therefore able to please herself in the selection of her friends. He could only put it down to her youth and inexperience, comforting himself with the reflection that he might possibly at no distant date be in a position to ask for the right to protect her from every danger and annoyance. For the sight of her sweet face had not only stimulated him to fresh exertions, but had helped him materially where only an hour or so ago he had well-nigh despaired.

When he had entered the theatre success had seemed so far away as to be practically beyond his reach; he was jaded in mind and body—utterly unstrung; now what had appeared so difficult of attainment had become not only possible, but so near that to gaze down the short vista dazzled him and took away his breath.

Traversing the thronged streets, he seemed to tread on air, and his spirits were so high he

could scarcely refrain from singing as he went. A trio of half-drunken roisterers filled him with envy as they passed arm in arm laughing and shouting; he felt inclined to snatch the whistle from a young urchin, who was drawing from it ear-piercing sounds, in such need was he of vent for his feelings. The reaction from his former state of despondency was almost too great for him to retain his equilibrium.

Only a few moments before Millicent and her companions had left, a tableau into which the different occupants of the box had unconsciously grouped themselves, a startling contrast of colour, an effect of light and shade, had flashed into his mind the inspiration of which he had been in search. Now, as he looked up into the wintry starlit sky, his picture formed itself before him, and the promise of beauty, which it doubtless held, was as clearly seen by him as though already

executed. His imagination went so far that he could have fancied it already framed and hung on the line at Burlington House, the cynosure of an admiring crowd, amongst which—indeed, foremost of them all—was the woman whose pure, proud face had suggested to him its idea, to whom—and this thought was pregnant with sweetness—his work would owe all that it won of success.

His excitement was so great that he required to walk it off, and he had gone more than half his distance before he hailed a passing hansom and was driven home.

In his little studio the first object that met his gaze was the picture on which he had wasted so many weary hours ; and not content with removing it from the easel, he tore it across and across, disgusted with the unmeaning figures and expressionless faces that in the absence of artistic fervour he had portrayed.

To stretch another canvas was his first act. The blank surface, with its wonderful possibilities and suggestiveness, inspired and filled him with enthusiasm. Far into the morning he sat and laboured at separate sketches in illustration of his idea. The gray dawn was already enriched by roseate and flame-coloured tints—and stirring sounds of life came to him faintly from outside—when reluctantly, compelled by sheer fatigue to cease from work, he threw himself upon his bed and slept the first sound refreshing sleep he had known for weeks.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEWS.

'Little Lady Cairne' was the name by which Nancy soon became very generally known. Falling first from Mrs. Rose's lips, it was taken up by Lord Fayrer, who with old-fashioned gallantry devoted himself to his daughter's guest at once, and enjoyed the small privileges which his age and position towards her conferred.

It was his pride to walk with her in the Park on Sunday after church, or to drive with her through Bond Street and Piccadilly, where passers-by would often stop and turn to catch another glimpse of the sweet fresh

face, so unlike most of the jaded and somewhat artificial beauties to which they were accustomed. Nor was the old man unwilling to be rallied about his fair companion ; he would often linger in his club window on the chance of seeing his daughter's carriage pass along Pall Mall, to witness the stir for which its advent was always the signal. Mrs. Rose had always excited more admiration than was justly her due ; but now the little seventeen-year-old widow beside her was the cynosure of every eye, and threatened to take the town by storm.

Lord Fayrer was very anxious that she should be presented at the first Drawing-room, but to this Nancy herself objected. Though she still persisted in declining to wear deep mourning, she felt it would be disrespectful to Sir Peter's memory not to conform somewhat to the usages of society, and in this idea was supported by Mrs. Rose.

They had agreed to flee from temptation at the first sign of the season's approach, and spend the summer abroad, rewarding themselves by a participation in some of the Homburg gaieties later on.

In the meantime the Park Lane mansion was being put in order, all except one room—a large, low room built out at the back, well lighted, and with evident signs of having once been used as a studio; this was scrupulously left untouched. The rest of the house was renovated on principles which were altered so often that it threatened to result in a confusion of styles which would have puzzled a lady-decorator to classify.

Mrs. Scarrot, who was in possession, and lived at this period in a whirl of excitement, spoke glibly of Turkish divans and Eastern corners, Indian dadoes and Japanese matting, having picked up from the workmen some art-jargon; but Nancy herself spoke of her

different possessions with bated breath and extremest caution.

'I was less restricted,' she used to complain, 'when I was perfectly ignorant. I possessed the courage of landsmen at sea. "They fears nothing, because they knows nothing," as a Brighton sailor once happily expressed it, speaking of the excursionists.'

'Take more time and look about you. Carry is in no hurry to part with you, you may be very sure; and as for me, I shall feel I have lost a daughter when you go from Mount Street,' said Lord Fayrer, to whom her remark had been addressed—and to his son he spoke very bluntly on the subject:

'I can't think what you are about, Lance, to let her go out of the family. Great heavens! what do you expect in a wife if she does not satisfy your taste? At your age I should have raved about her—worshipped her for her brightness and her beauty.'

'We take things more quietly in these days, sir,' said his son, turning to him a face like a blank wall, so void was it of all expression.

'You pass my comprehension. Seeing her day by day and at all times; sung to, talked to, and appealed to by her in that pretty deferential way that seems as if it might only be assumed, so merry is the twinkle in her eye—that you can keep cool under such an artillery explains something of the kudos you gained in Egypt; but upon my soul I don't understand it!'

'Perhaps it was on account of the very qualities you condemn that Sir Peter made me her trustee.'

'Oh! no doubt it's an excellent thing not to be inflammable, not to be even human; but, as I said, I don't understand it. It is no blood of mine that runs through your veins. Little Lady Cairne is sweet enough and fair

enough to move anybody's heart, and rather than lose her altogether, by gad! I'd marry her myself!'

The threat, though uttered in jest and with a full sense of its absurdity, recurred to him again and again; he might have entertained the idea more seriously, had not Nancy always treated him in very filial fashion, never suspecting for a moment that any other treatment would have pleased him better. Certainly, at that time his lordship, always attired with conspicuous smartness, became more dandified than ever, and was more frequently found in his daughter's rooms than in his own chambers on the tier below—facts which Caroline Rose was quick to discern, and which caused her to ask Nancy one day point-blank whether she had any desire to be her step-mother.

The girl's frank amusement would have reassured her had she had any misgivings,

but she did not understand why almost immediately a shadow fell across Nancy's face, and why there was an undercurrent of tragedy in her tone as she replied :

'I have no desire to be anybody's step-mother, my ambitions are all satisfied—too well satisfied, indeed.'

The fear had flashed across her mind whether by any stretch of imagination, or twisting and turning of the tables of affinity, she could be supposed to stand in that relationship to Leslie Wolffe. If so, no wonder he was changed and had been so impervious to her pleading after Sir Peter's death. The bare suspicion, monstrous as it seemed, tortured her, and when she had been a month in town and had heard nothing of him, it was succeeded by others quite as wild and improbable. She began to dread all sorts of disasters which might have happened, none of which, however, came near to the circum-

stances of the case. By the merest chance at last she gained a clue to the real difficulties that had beset him.

It was one afternoon when Mrs. Rose had gone out and she was alone in the dining-room arranging some flowers for the table. She was half through her task, when a feeling of depression with which she had been struggling all day overcame her, and she sank into a deep armchair, and leaning her head upon her hands, gave herself up to thought, her face seeming the more pathetic in its dejection from contrast with her usual brightness.

The experience of the last few months had sobered and also aged her; more swiftly than could have been foreseen she had crossed the border-line and left her happy childhood behind her for ever. It almost appeared as though she had been defrauded of her girlishness by the strange chance which made her

a married woman at least in name, and weighed her down with a spurious dignity which, though she laughed at it, she could not quite ignore. The sweet period when a maiden wanders fancy-free over that pleasant neutral ground whose very charm lies in its absence of actuality, its dearth of deep joys and consequent immunity from any of life's poignant sorrow, had had for her but a brief existence. It seemed as though there had been but one night between the day when she was laughing as a child and the day when as a woman she had wept. As clearly as Millicent had done, she realized the pity of it, and sympathy with her own sad plight brought the infrequent tears into her eyes—tears which were not allowed to fall.

As they grew cold and dried upon her lashes, she heard voices on the stairs, but she did not care to move. If it were visitors, the servant would say that Mrs. Rose was out ;

she did not suppose it could be anyone for her.

A tap at the door and an intruding head undeceived her. Lord Fayrer appeared.

'They told me you were in, and I ventured to come up and bring a friend. Are you busy? You do not look very busy.'

In a moment Nancy was on her feet and smiling:

'I was resting on my oars. Presently I shall be resting on my laurels.' She snatched up some flowers and tried to look very bright and business-like, an effort in which she did not quite succeed.

On her face were still traces of emotion, in the flushed red of her cheeks, the suspicious moisture that caused her eyes to look more brilliant than ever. The cool green leaves that were caught close to her breast with a little excited gesture, not unnoticed by one of the on-lookers, heightened the effect of her

glowing colour, and the creamy blossoms that trailed across her gown, one just touching her throat, and losing by comparison with its warm soft whiteness, completed the picture that quite unconsciously she formed.

She was so graceful and unstudied in all her movements that any of her poses might have been suggestive to an artist.

Mr. Oliver Pontifex, who at an invitation from Lord Fayrer had followed him into the room, was not slow to appreciate the loveliness he saw. He had been introduced to Nancy about a fortnight ago in the Park, and had often joined her since when she was riding or walking with Lord Fayrer ; enjoying the freshness of her remarks, and amused by the indifference with which she accepted the admiration of which she was the object. It was not that she seemed to dislike the compliments he paid her, and that others

mutely rendered as she passed, nor had she, as he at once divined, so much knowledge of the customs of society as to object to them on the score of their being in bad taste, but simply—so it seemed to him—she did not care. Either, he decided, she was unaware of her own loveliness, or so embued with the sense of it, that her vanity took everything for granted. She looked too young, too child-like, for him to arrive at the real root of the matter—to guess that it was because all her thoughts were centred in one, that other men were to her like shadows, as unsubstantial in their speech as in her eyes they were in person.

This was the first time he had seen her indoors, and he was charmed with her from the novel point of view, letting his eyes rest with palpable approbation on the rich tints of her disordered hair and her complexion's glow, while, be it understood, the approbation

of Oliver Pontifex was supposed to be very well worth the having.

Holding an appointment at Court, he was in attendance at all the Drawing-rooms, and had made the reputation of many a *débutante*, while not to be recognised by him as such would have secured the failure of any beauty in her profession.

He was a leader of cotillons, a well-known figure in the Row, and his own sex generally followed where he led in more matters than that of dress ; though in this also his taste was unimpeachable. He had the credit of contributing to a review, and from time to time in the magazines rather erotic verses, whose authorship he had not denied, had appeared above the initials ' O. P.'

He was a man of perhaps forty years of age, singularly striking in appearance, if not actually handsome ; his heavy black moustaches and black hair, which he wore rather

long, lent vigour and individuality to his pale olive skin, while his dark eyes were expressive, sometimes dangerously so. Women were usually fascinated by his masterful way, and a certain cool defiance of the ordinary laws of courtesy, while never actually outraging them, combined with a less easily defined charm, possessed perhaps by one man in a thousand, and only to be described by its effect. No savage warrior could flourish more scalps than Oliver Pontifex could boast of amatory triumphs ; some of these, however, gave scant occasion for any proper pride.

'Mrs. Rose is out; you will stay until she comes in?' said Nancy, addressing Lord Fayrer.

'Unfortunately I have an engagement: that is why I brought my visitor for you and Carry to entertain. If you will give Mr. Pontifex a cup of tea, and let him sit here and

talk to you a little, I am sure he will enjoy it very much.'

'If I might help Lady Cairne,' was suggested in a low, rich voice.

'That seems a very good idea. No song, no supper. By the time Mrs. Rose comes back our labours will be ended; we shall have earned our tea.'

For a moment Lord Fayrer hesitated, doubtful of the propriety of leaving Nancy unchaperoned; but his business being important, and the fact of her being free from the restraints that are imposed on unmarried girls, made him put aside his scruples and bid them a hasty adieu.

Nancy threw herself with ardour into the work she always enjoyed; and Mr. Pontifex followed her round the table with a basket, from which she chose the various sprays that seemed called into requisition, he now and then giving her a hint how to improve her

grouping, which she generally adopted, with a little impertinent affectation of surprise at the artistic ingenuity he displayed.

'I thought men knew nothing and cared nothing for the prettinesses.'

'What have we done to deserve that calumny?'

'It is what you have left undone, perhaps.'

'I am not conscious of any such omission. I have always worshipped beauty wherever I found it—whether she "dated her letters" from nature or from art, but more especially when it was from a face. I have heard people quote time-honoured phrases against feminine beauty, stigmatizing it as a silent cheat, and at best only a good letter of introduction; I have said myself that so long as a woman was not *furieusement laide*, her appearance need not militate against her; and yet a pretty girl comes upon the scene, and all our philo-

sophy proves what philosophy *always* proves in practice.'

'I was not thinking of people. My thoughts were on my work; and did not you offer to help me, Mr. Pontifex?'

'I am lending you the support of my presence. I find it very pleasant to have an occupation.'

'So it appears.' She looked at him from under her eyelids with an air of sovereign contempt as he leant against the sideboard, basket still in hand as badge of office, but otherwise assisting not at all in her task.

He returned her glance with a quizzical smile.

'I am an idle man, Lady Cairne, and have studied all the branches of my sole profession. I discovered long ago that it affords one absolutely no pleasure to do nothing when there is nothing to be done. It is only when one is obviously neglecting a duty—in this in-

stance also a pleasure—that one feels the full satisfaction laziness is calculated to confer.'

Nancy, though in her heart were sentiments not utterly at variance with those he had expressed, did not choose to agree with him openly.

'I dare say,' she said slowly, weighing the merits of a crimson against a purple blossom in conjunction with a yellow—'I dare say it will suit you excellently well when we get our rights; when we make your laws and issue them; when we fight for you, and doctor those we wound; when we preach to you—I suppose we should preach very well. Our tongues are our greatest points, or should I say our sharpest? And we seem to develop a talent for lecturing—after marriage.'

'It has always been a moot question why women were created,' he rejoined. 'One cynic said, "For the preservation of little dogs," but the more popular notion seems to

be that they were designed to amuse themselves and us.'

'A very noble end and aim. You don't think, Mr. Pontifex, we are all cut after one pattern?'

'I dare not doubt the infinite variety of your sex. It is historic. I was going to add that of all sorts and conditions I least admire the busy woman—the woman with a mission—and that I hope no one will cultivate these qualifications with any thought of neutralizing the effect of what they may consider deficiencies in my character.'

'Disabuse yourself of any such idea. There, my work is finished. I am busy no longer. My only "mission" now is to amuse Lord Fayrer's guest until Mrs. Rose and tea arrive.'

She had stepped backward, and, her head slightly on one side, was surveying the result of her labours with evident satisfaction; while

his eyes were bent on her, and presently an ejaculation escaped his lips that it was impossible not to suspect had reference to herself and not to what she had just done, so fervent was its tone:

'Most lovely!'

Little Lady Cairne turned to him at once, a disdainful surprise in her sweet face; then, with chilly formality, she suggested they should go to the other room.

Rather more amused than alarmed at her manner, which he regarded as he might have done the ruffled feathers of a canary, Mr. Pontifex was inclined to linger where the surroundings were unconventional, and she could not entrench herself behind barriers of chairs and tables which lend themselves so readily to the manufacture of small talk and seem to preclude all social ease. Experience had taught him a man may meet a woman a dozen times in a drawing-room and know her

none the better, whereas a chance encounter off the beaten track takes him double distance in half the time.

'Won't you show me these pictures, Lady Cairne?' he said, stopping in front of one, which, as it had been opposite to him for the last ten minutes, he might already have exhaustively examined.

'Do you care for paintings?'

'I always see every picture to be seen. Perhaps you will let me escort you to some of the galleries by-and-bye. It is not true, I hope, that you and Mrs. Rose are leaving town before the season begins.'

'That is our intention. Do you know Mrs. Rose?'

'She has not mentioned me? Yet we used to be great friends.'

'And are not so now?'

He shrugged his shoulders, while a little smile crept over his face:

'"Hélas! chaque chose a son cours,
Tout fuit——"

What a pretty water-colour! and the artist's name is quite unknown to me.'

'It is very difficult, I suppose, to make a name. It may take years,' she said awkwardly and blushing.

'You might spend a lifetime and yet fail. Only the other day I met a man I should have thought would have got on, since even as an amateur he had succeeded so far as to get a picture accepted by the Academy; but now he has adopted painting as a profession he finds it a different thing, I fancy. Someone told me he had lost all his money, which may be true, as when I saw him at a corner shop in Piccadilly he was trying to sell a sketch for half a guinea.'

'What was his name?'—her heart throbbed painfully in suspense, something telling her that news had come at last.

'Wolffe. I only had the slightest acquaintance with him; but I felt sorry for him and asked for his address—said I wanted to buy a picture or two for my new chambers. Not an entirely disinterested act, as I hoped to pick up something good at a moderate price. All these artists overrate their work, until actual distress brings them to their proper bearings.'

Nancy was stooping forward to spell out the signature in the corner of a picture, so that her face was hidden; but anyone who watched her closely might have seen the tumultuous heaving of her breast and the convulsive clenching of her fingers as they grasped her gown. For a few moments all was confusion in her brain, and as Mr. Pontifex went on talking, his words rang in her ears like echoes in an empty cave; but when at last she spoke her voice was firm and her

expression an admirable assumption of indifference.

'I know Mr. Wolffe, and I want some pictures, too. I wish you would take me to his studio, Mr. Pontifex. I have never seen an artist's studio—occupied,' her composure failing a little as her thoughts reverted to the half-empty room in Park Lane, which was still undisturbed by any alteration, and as sacred in her sight as a shrine.

'It will give me the greatest pleasure. To-day it is too late; but to-morrow I am disengaged and at your service.'

A little breathlessly Lady Cairne agreed to the arrangement, half alarmed at the temerity of her own act now that she stood committed to it. Confused and excited, she had scarcely patience to reply to her visitor's desultory remarks as he stopped in front of a sea-piece.

'That,' he said lightly, pointing to a vessel dimly discernible on the horizon with sails

outspread, 'is the ship that is taking you across to France; and in that,' pointing to one close inland, 'are your disconsolate lovers, following to bring you back.'

'They are not hurrying much,' scornfully.

'They will put on more speed presently.'

'Is that your experience?' she asked; 'I thought a lover's haste cooled down with time.'

He did not at once reply, and as Nancy glanced at him rather maliciously, she saw a sudden change come over his face; the next moment he was greeting Mrs. Rose with his customary nonchalance, she having come in after Nancy, but unnoticed by either of them. She had heard the last few sentences, and they seemed to have discomposed her more than anything they had contained could account for. A cold disfavour was in her eyes, and in spite of an endeavour to appear

unmoved, her lips curled in irrepressible contempt.

A few civilities were interchanged with an air of armed neutrality on the lady's part; while the gentleman seemed quite at ease and congratulated her gracefully on looking so well. But he did not, after all, stay to tea, and Nancy drank hers alone, for Mrs. Rose also disappeared when he departed, and did not come back until a few minutes before dinner-time, when she was in full dress and seemed quite herself, though Nancy thought once or twice that there was a strained note in her conversation, and that she avoided the glare of the gas.

And while she watched her new friend with tender solicitude, Colonel Fayrer was watching her, thinking that never before had he seen her look so womanly and sweet.

She was as bright as ever, but softer in her manner; now and then she blushed for

no ostensible reason, while a smile stole across her face, and once in the midst of laughter he saw tears were in her eyes. In the drawing-room he seated himself beside her.

'You have had good news?' he asserted quietly.

'What makes you think so?' She was a little startled to find she was self-betrayed.

'There must be some occult sympathy between us; or perhaps I have a genius for making discoveries only just showing itself, but which may result in my becoming a Columbus or a Newton. You are such a woman of the world now I dare not suggest it was anything in your manner or appearance that made me think something had happened.'

'It is not good news, but it is news, and that in itself is good,' she said softly.

'You have heard of Mr. Wolffe?'

'I know where he is, and that he is not successful. To-morrow I am going to see

him. Oh, Colonel Fayrer, do you think he will let me help him?'

His contending emotions banished all trace of feeling from her companion's face. He was furiously jealous; at the same time sorry for her pain, and not unsympathetic so far as the artist was concerned, for he had liked what he had seen of him, and considered he had been unjustly used. But nothing that he felt could have been guessed from his expression, which was utterly blank.

'It is impossible to say,' he said in a voice which he knew was hard, and yet could not alter in its inflexion; therefore he was not surprised to see an angry colour deepen on Nancy's face, while she changed the conversation at once.

It had been his lot in life to be so often misunderstood that he did not resent the fact now; but fell in with her humour, which was satirical and frivolous by turns. It was to

him she talked all the evening ; his apparent want of sympathy was what she required as a stimulant to keep her outwardly gay and self-possessed. But the unfortunate guardsman knew he must not build any hopes on so fragile a foundation ; he guessed she had never liked him so little as this evening, when she devoted herself exclusively to his entertainment ; in fact, that he was only being taken as a mental tonic—wholesome, because so very bitter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ART PATRONS.

Wolffe was hard at work with his new picture that next afternoon when visitors were announced, and his first action was to remove his easel bodily into the next room, being jealous of anyone seeing his great work until it was completed. So far it was justifying his hopes, and in spite of some small difficulties, which had arranged themselves as the painting progressed, he was more satisfied than he would admit even to himself, lest he might only be courting disappointment. He had been too much absorbed in his occupation to feel aught but irritation at being

disturbed ; and only the faintest curiosity stirred his mind when footsteps came along the passage and he heard a man's voice, then a woman's answering shyly, and so softly that in an instant a wild hope made his heart almost stop beating in suspense.

Then he guessed whom it must be, and if his countenance fell at all when the hanging curtain was uplifted, and Nancy met him with an uncertain smile, no one could have seen it. He grasped her hand with cordiality that set all her fears at rest, as he told her what a pleasure it was to see a friend. Then he greeted Mr. Pontifex, rather coldly Nancy thought, and wondered if she might put this down to jealousy, the doubt making her look very lovely as she said falteringly :

'I thought you might be angry at our coming. Of course, you have many friends, and if you are very busy——'

'You don't seem to have anything on hand

at present,' said Mr. Pontifex, whose quick sight had noticed at once the absence of an easel, though some wet paint-brushes were lying across a palette, and had evidently been lately used.

'You must content yourself with seeing what is on the walls,' returned Wolffe dryly, and addressed himself again to Nancy.

She looked at him attentively as he talked, and, with the intuitive perception that is a part of love, knew that he had suffered since she saw him last, and also that he had come well out of his troubles. He looked older and far graver, though at times a twinkle in his 'very blue' eyes showed he had not lost his sense of humour, and his expression had certainly gained in nobility and strength of purpose. A rather dandified air, attributable to very careful dressing, which had been remarkable before, had disappeared, and in his loose coat and knotted necktie he looked

infinitely better than in the more fashionable garb which had always seemed to jar with what was Bohemian in his appearance.

Society stifles the best that is in its votaries. Those who lead the simplest lives and work the hardest, or those who, face to face with Nature, wrest from her some of her wonderful secrets, show more clearly that man was made after the Divine image, and has in him still much that is Divine.

Without attempting to explain the change, Nancy saw that it was there.

'How is — your sister?' asked Wolffe presently, with an assumption of indifference which could only have imposed on a woman who was self-deceived and did not desire to guess the truth.

'She was very well when I saw her last.'

'Then she is not with you?'

Nancy shook her head.

'I am sorry for that. Somehow, I always

pictured you together. She—perhaps she has gone out of town ?'

'No ; she is here, living near me, though not with me. Indeed I am not to blame. It is the money that should have been yours that separates us. She will not accept a shilling of it from me, or benefit from it in any way.'

His face flushed, and into his eyes came a strange triumphant light. It was pardonable if he supposed that some personal feeling may have tinged her views, and that for his sake she resented the injustice, more than on grounds of general morality.

'She is living with friends ?' he hazarded.

'She is companion to a lady,' said Nancy, who had no false pride, and only felt ashamed because the refusal to live with her was a mute condemnation of her action in the past.

A vivid recollection of the people he had seen Millicent with at the theatre came before Wolffe, and caused him to turn away with a

feeling of impotent wrath, whose expression he could scarcely restrain. Recovering himself, however, immediately, he came back to Nancy's side, and stood there waiting to hear more. She was looking very dejected, not understanding what had moved him, only uneasy because he frowned.

'It is the fault of that wretched money. If you would take that back!'

'It was never mine,' he corrected her.

'It should have been yours. I robbed you. I have been your worst enemy, though I wished to be your friend. I never forget that; it has spoiled all my pleasure. Mr. Wolffe, the money *is* yours. Take it.'

There was such pathos in her voice, such passionate regret, and in the eyes lifted to his own shone such soft entreaty, that Wolffe could not help being touched, although his resolution to accept no pecuniary reparation never wavered.

He smiled down at her pleasantly, twirling his thick, reddish-brown moustaches.

'That is quite impossible. But there is no reason we should not be friends. I will do anything else to please you,' he declared, and then proved that she was quite forgiven by taking an interest in her actions. 'I hope *he* is not a friend,' he said, pointing to where Oliver Pontifex was scrutinizing some picture at the far end of the studio.

'Not of mine,' eagerly. 'Lord Fayrer knows him very well, and brought him to the house. *You* will come to see us now?' shyly.

He was going to object that he had no leisure for visiting, when she added persuasively:

'If Millicent sees you there she will know you have forgiven me and forgive me too.'

'I will come,' he said quickly, and left her to answer something that Mr. Pontifex was

asking about the picture that had roused his interest.

He was absent for only a few minutes, and came back looking very determined and a little put out, Nancy thought.

'Well ?' she questioned eagerly.

'What is it you want to know ?' smiling.

'Did he — does he like any of your pictures ?'

'He admires several, he was good enough to tell me ; and one more than the rest. He is no judge, scarcely knows a water-colour from an oil, and misuses all the technical expressions he aspires to ; but, of course, the kindness is the same.'

The laughter in his eyes kindled responsive merriment in hers. They dared not laugh aloud for fear of giving offence, but the joke they shared banished the last feeling of restraint, and they chatted together as lightly as in the old days in Marine Square before

anything had occurred to create a coldness. It was when a pause came in the conversation that Nancy noticed he looked pale and weary, and with a sharp pang recalled what Mr. Pontifex had said about his being perhaps in actual want.

'I—wanted to buy a picture myself—if you would let me,' she broke in jerkily, and crimsoned violently when she saw him smile as though in recognition of her intention.

'Why, what would you do with it? I am afraid none of these are fit for a lady's boudoir. They are too huge and unwieldy.'

She did not answer, but he remembered so soon as he had spoken that it was she who now possessed the spacious dining-room and library at the old house in Park Lane, where the wainscoted walls of the big entrance-hall alone would have held comfortably every painting in his studio.

'Now this,' went on Nancy, feverishly

anxious to attain her object, and pointing with her umbrella to the one that primarily met her view, '*this* I like immensely.'

'It is at your service,' lightly.

'You mean I may buy it?' with premature exultation in her tone.

'Scarcely that. As a purchase I could not conscientiously recommend it. It was the very first daub to which I ever signed my name, and shows very marked signs ot the "'prentice hand."'

'I thought it very pretty, but if you think this one——'

'I am afraid you must not have that one, either.'

'Then this,' desperately, seeing that Mr. Pontifex was making his way towards them.

But he only shook his head, smiling so kindly she could not feel offended, though she knew that he had guessed her object,

and was practically rejecting her proffered aid.

'You have not thought better of your decision as to that picture?' asked Oliver Pontifex as he came up.

'It is not for sale.'

'Then I think, Lady Cairne, we ought not to take up Mr. Wolffe's time any longer. When you are ready to go——'

'I am ready now,' she returned, but looked regretfully round the room. She had not seen the pictures, not even those she had proposed to buy, so deep had she been in conversation, so absorbed in her own thoughts, and there were other treasures she would have liked to have investigated: beautiful Eastern screens and silken draperies all stiff with gold, tall palms in copper or enamelled vases, quaint Burmese idols and cabinets full of curios and old china—relics of former prosperous days.

'May I come again?' she begged impulsively.

'As often as you please. You will always be welcome.'

She gave him her hand, and the artist held it in a firm and friendly grasp. Then she left with Mr. Pontifex.

They walked for awhile down the quiet, unfrequented street, their footsteps echoing sharply on the stone pavement; nothing was to be heard but the wheels of the brougham as it followed them. Mr. Pontifex was not a masher of that modern type which pins its faith on a hansom cab, either a private one, or an S.T. running on india-rubber tyres. He noticed that 'little Lady Cairne' was quiet and confused, but he did not, however, solve the riddle of her chastened mood. Had he given the matter any serious thought, he would have concluded that, like himself, she was chagrined at being thwarted

in a charitable project; for it was, as he had just discovered, a very unpleasant sensation to receive such cavalier treatment where you meant to act art patron.

'It is all a myth about that fellow being hard up. To judge by his manner, he must be rolling in riches,' he remarked ill-temperedly.

'Don't you think it is the poor people who are the proudest?' she asked, in a low voice.

'I have heard it said it is only the poor people who wear pride with any grace; but just now I am not sure that I am inclined to agree with that opinion.'

'You offered to buy one of his pictures?'

'I offered him his own price for one I fancied.'

'And he refused?'

'As if it had been an insult.'

'What sort of picture was it?' she asked absently.

'You ought to know it very well, Lady Cairne, for I suppose you sat for it. It is a portrait, or, rather, a fancy picture of yourself with a canary.'

'I know,' she interpolated breathlessly.

'And really excellently well executed. I should say he is a rising man, and that one would not lose by any purchases one made now.'

'It is a pity you missed your chance. You should have chosen another if the one you wanted was not available,' returned Nancy, who had no sympathy with the mercantile spirit that had actuated him on this occasion.

'That is not my way at all. If I cannot have the one thing I want I will have no other.' To this rather grandiloquent sentiment Nancy did not respond.

She had been speaking mechanically, scarcely conscious of the words that left her

lips, having room for only the one thought in her heart, the one feeling.

Leslie Wolffe was surely beginning to care for her at last, or why had he disapproved of Mr. Pontifex as an escort for her; and did not his refusal to allow him to possess the portrait of herself point to jealousy? The surmise filled her with shy delight, and sent fluctuating blushes flying across her face, that would have betrayed her to anyone less self-absorbed than her companion.

Her elation would have been increased had she gained a fuller knowledge of the facts, and known how costly a compliment he had paid her—how little at that very moment stood between the artist and utter destitution. Of the capital with which he had started only a few shillings remained, and if nothing intervened the morrow would witness his first interview with the pawnbroker, after which the swiftness of his downward course might

be foreseen. Even now he was confessing ruefully to himself that he had been wrong-headed and unwise; that had his manner been more conciliatory his would-be benefactor might probably have contented himself with another picture; and that he might even have so far strained a point as to have permitted Nancy the satisfaction of spending some part of her plenty in rescuing him from his present strait. He smiled as he remembered how humble she had been, and how he, who should have been a suppliant, had lorded it over the rich and fashionable beauty. To Nancy Bell, when she and her sister had rented lodgings and might have been considered in a subordinate position, he had been invariably courteous, while to Lady Cairne he had been abrupt, if not absolutely rude. Yet he had never liked her so well as when she stood before him like a naughty schoolgirl, in her rich robes and picturesque hat,

whose broad brim had cast a tender shadow over her persuasive eyes and the penitent curves of her red mouth. He wondered whether any other man would have remained so unmoved when she pleaded with mute pathos, more eloquent than the broken sentences which had fallen from her lips. But then had any other man so strong a safeguard against other women's charms as he, who loved the fairest of them all, and hoped to win her—a hope which, though without foundation, gave inspiration to his work, and helped him through all the troubles which at this time beset him.

The stir of this temporary interruption having subsided, and the landlady — her waning confidence restored by the unusual sight of visitors, whose distinction could not be doubted—having been induced to take her fluttering cap-ribbons and their curiosity from the room, he settled himself down to his work again, and threw himself heart and soul into

it, glad to believe as the hours flew quickly by he was so much the nearer to his goal, and had a fair chance of seeing Millicent again at a not very distant date.

In the meantime, Nancy, undaunted by her failure, so soon as Mr. Pontifex had left her in Mount Street, only waited for his carriage to get out of sight to sally forth again and walk in the direction of Piccadilly. In the window of the corner shop which had been specified as the one where Wolffe had tried to dispose of some of his sketches, there were some sporting prints and a few original water-colours ; none of these, however, bore his name or initials ; and after pausing a moment to summon up her courage, Nancy walked boldly in.

There had been a group outside attracted by the pictures, but inside the shop was empty, and Nancy thought her own voice sounded formidably loud and harsh as she asked if 'any of Mr. Wolffe's paintings were

here for sale,' although, as a matter of fact, she was speaking in a whisper, and the young man who came forward to attend her had to bend his head to hear her question. Then he told her politely that the name was unknown to him, adding, as he saw her face cloud over, that so many artists came there it was difficult to remember all, and perhaps it was her beauty that moved him to suggest that he should look through what sketches and paintings he had to see if any bore Mr. Wolffe's signature.

Together they turned over a large number, but with no success ; it happened that not even the initial ' W ' was on any one they saw, and ' Little Lady Cairne ' had to content herself with leaving her address and asking that nothing the artist might subsequently offer should be rejected, but bought for her at his own price, and without her name appearing in the matter.

She blushed vividly as the order was registered in a big book by the young shopman, though he, believing he understood the situation, was considerate enough to give the transaction a business complexion, carefully impressing upon her, by implication, that it was customary to receive such commissions.

The colour was so deeply burnt into her cheeks that at dinner-time it had not subsided, and Mrs. Rose, who had asked no questions as to the expedition, could not but notice it and draw her own conclusions; though, for a wonder, since she had shrewd insight and some knowledge of the world, they did not point in the right direction. What she suspected infused an unusual bitterness into her thoughts, and made her so silent that, had not Nancy been also very absent-minded, she must have inferred that somehow she had given offence. But in her heart was such a tumult of emotions that the quiet was

very grateful to her taste, and when afterwards they were alone in the drawing-room, the subdued lights and the soft crackling of the fire caused her to fall into a dreamy mood, from which she only roused herself when her hostess proposed that they should go to bed.

Then she sat upright in her chair.

'Carry,' she asked, hesitating a little in her speech, 'would it disappoint you if I decided not to go abroad this spring?'

Mrs. Rose started so violently that the book she was still holding slipped from her fingers into her lap.

'It is not too late to alter our plans. Nothing was absolutely fixed.'

'You mean *you* would not go either?'

'Not if you wish me to be with you.'

Nancy rose impulsively and knelt by her friend's chair, leaning her head against her arm, with intention keeping her face averted,

lest she should be posed by any awkward questions.

'You know,' went on Mrs. Rose gently, 'I consider you are under my charge for the present. I promised Lancelot I would do caretaker; and my task is a pleasant one, an easy one—till now,' a conviction forcing itself upon her that complications were already threatened.

'You are very good to me,' murmured Nancy. 'You do not even ask *why* I have changed my mind.'

'Would it be any good?' she asked, smiling sadly. 'Who was it that invariably inquired for the *woman* when he wished to unravel any mystery? When one of *our* sex becomes enigmatical and uncertain in her movements, it is safe to infer the influence of a *man*. There is always someone—always.'

Nancy's head was pressed more closely against her, and her hand nestling under

her arm gave it a gentle pressure ; but she did not answer. She would have confided her secret to her friend, had she been certain that her hopes had some foundation. As it was, she was ashamed. Already she had been over-bold, even unmaidenly in the matter, and she must make no more mistakes.

Mrs. Rose, with ready tact, began to speak of something else ; but was herself too much interested for her thoughts not to recur to what she believed was also running in Nancy's mind. Against her will almost the question was presently put :

'And you had a nice afternoon? Mr. Pontifex was very pleasant, I suppose?'

'Yes. I thought him very pleasant,' was the answer.

The girl, who had been staring into the red heart of the fire, recalled herself by an effort from contemplation of the imaginary scenes she pictured there, which she had tried to

view as prophetic of a happy future. In her tone lingered some of the languor which indulgence in such dreaming had evoked; and as she turned towards her questioner there was a love-light in her eyes calculated to deceive anyone who had no clue to her train of thought.

'He is charming, of course. Ladies have always thought him so,' commented Mrs. Rose, with an accent of bitterness which startled Nancy into more serious attention to the subject they discussed.

'Has he offended you? He said that you and he were great friends—once.'

Caroline Rose released herself from Nancy's clasp and stood up, looking very slender, very pale in the firelight.

'Did he say that?' She laughed harshly; and then said: 'Child, are you never coming to bed?'

Then she stood there for some moments

after without movement—a very forlorn and solitary figure, though the room was bright and cosy, while Nancy, flitting about and collecting some of her belongings, provided an element of life. There was something in her attitude which would have impressed a sense of her loneliness, even friendlessness, upon an onlooker. Her face was fixed in its expression, but the stony despair in her eyes gave the lie to the smile which lay lightly on her lips, and made her resemblance to the Sphinx, on which her brother always insisted, more remarkable.

In her heart she felt that the Sphinx herself, with her inscrutable secret, set up alone in a desert of sand, blown upon by the wind, deluged by the rain, or scorched by a pitiless Eastern sun through weary, never-changing years, was not more isolated, more desolate than she—by her own act.

CHAPTER XXV.

FORCED TO EXPLAIN.

Millicent, in the meantime, was not becoming more reconciled to her new surroundings. Sometimes she wondered whether honest vulgarity or actual penury would not have proved preferable to the show of gentility and the affectation of being in the smartest set which it was Mrs. Messiter's aim to maintain. Like many other women, though clever in a way, and capable of saying sharp things in happy phrases, she was utterly devoid of a sense of humour, and saw nothing ridiculous in her pretensions. Nor was she afraid that others might be less conveniently obtuse.

She had circulated several fictitious accounts of her birth and ancestry, all of which did not tally ; but to Mark Skene, who knew something of her antecedents—having met her first when she was a salaried dependent in the house of a friend—she spoke mysteriously of the ups and downs of life, endeavouring to imbue him with the belief that a series of disasters had brought her to that subordinate position.

'My grandfather was a Cardinal,' she asserted recklessly one day, and could not understand why Skene was so evidently amused, while pretending to seem shocked.

'If I were you I should keep that very quiet; it is never necessary to advertise one's misfortunes,' he cautioned her very gravely ; and although for some time she missed the point of the gibe, she was careful not to advance that pretension again.

To Millicent she was always very amiable,

and, indeed, she liked her in a way—nor was she insensible to the fact that the presence of a pretty, ladylike girl in the house enhanced its attractions. All the same, she was jealous of her, the more keenly so that the constant presence of her old lover, and the attentions he considered it politic to pay her, had re-aroused feelings which only slumbered in her breast, and never were entirely extinct.

Skene's conduct during this time was indicative of the dual nature in every man, whose various chords strike responsively to various touches. With Millicent he appeared chivalrous and high-minded, nor in this was he conscious of deceit, since all his aspirations were towards goodness when in her presence, and perhaps, if he succeeded in winning her, would have a permanent leaning in that direction. The faint desire to lead a better life is inherent in the greatest sinner; and his lapses had never been very serious

ones. But to Mrs. Messiter he was as cruel as only a man can be, and then only to a woman he has ceased to love. He had no scruples in turning her affection for him to his own advantage, and even encouraged it with the idea of proving to another that all were not so difficult as herself. The memory of days when this *rusée* widow was a loving, ignorant girl, and had also an influence for good upon him, had faded utterly from his mind ; he did not trouble to consider whether he himself was not in a measure responsible for the change that was noticeable in her.

That he was daily gaining ground with Millicent he saw plainly, and the delight this knowledge caused him would have driven away any other misgivings had he been inclined to entertain them.

There was no doubt he contrasted favourably with the other men who frequented the house ; and, indeed, in considering the matter,

Millicent felt compelled to admit that none she had ever met had seemed so trustworthy, so true. His friendship had been untiring, and nothing he had ever done for them had been set forward to constitute a claim upon her gratitude. That subtle consciousness which never fails a woman in such cases told her he loved her still, and she appreciated the generosity with which he had refrained from adding to her perplexities.

Unselfishness is a virtue that mightily becomes the sex in which its presence is seldom detected; and Skene was fain to feel a glow of satisfaction in himself when he saw how high he stood in the estimation of her he laboured so to please.

She was very gentle to him in those days—the more so that she felt she had not always done him justice, or treated him with the consideration he deserved; yet had he been critically disposed, he might even then have

taken exception to her manner, it being often forced, as though her heart could not impulsively follow the dictates of her reason. She thought him the best man she had ever known, the most disinterestedly kind, but could not feel towards him that spontaneous warmth which before she left Brighton had gone out to Leslie Wolffe. That last interview especially had touched her very deeply, and she found herself often wondering whether he were succeeding in his arduous endeavour.

Once she asked Mark Skene if he had heard anything about Wolffe, and blushed angrily when he gave her a quick, suspicious glance.

'It is natural we should want to know what is happening to him, since we were the cause of his being obliged to work in earnest,' she explained coldly.

'I suppose he is no worse off than he was during Sir Peter's lifetime. He had

always a taste for Bohemian life, I hear ; and now can enjoy it with a clearer conscience, since society has no claim upon him. But if his hand is against all civilized institutions, he must expect to be judged severely by those whose views are not so broad.'

In this there was no distinct accusation, but Millicent was left with an impression that the artist was not doing well for himself or for his art, while, not content with this, Mr. Skene mentioned casually to two or three that Leslie Wolffe was 'going to the bad,' on the chance of its being repeated to her ; and a lie being notoriously a good traveller, it eventually did reach her—not, however, exactly fulfilling its intention.

Sorrow was the sentiment of which she was first most keenly conscious—sorrow that an unmerited misfortune had embittered what she was sure was a naturally noble character ; and again she was remorseful that it was

through them the change had come. It was in their house, and because of them (she generously bracketed herself with Nancy, and took an equal share of the blame), he had met with this cruel reverse of fortune ; and now they could do nothing to counteract the mischief they had done. Yet sometimes she remembered that not always had she had so good an opinion of him, nor did all the circumstances of their acquaintance justify her in holding it now. Though that first glaring fault which had resulted in his being domiciled beneath their roof was practically condoned when they allowed him to stay on, it did not improve matters to believe that a mercenary consideration, and not a young man's unthinking folly, had incited him to the adventure ; for there seemed no doubt, from what Skene had said, that he knew of Sir Peter being there and deliberately took up his abode in the same place to

watch his own interests. It was a pity, for *Nancy's sake,* she thought—and mentally laid a marked stress upon her sister's name—that, seeming so straightforward, he should have been capable of an act that savoured of deception; a pity, too, that he should be so altogether lovable a person, *if* (and now mental emphasis was laid doubtfully on the preposition) he were not deserving of affection.

Sometimes the doubt assailed her whether Mark Skene were not prejudiced against the man whose presence in their house he had always resented, but she dismissed the idea indignantly. He, at least, had proved himself worthy of trust; it was because he was the best and noblest who had ever crossed her path that she relied upon his friendship, and welcomed his advent always as a relief from a great deal that she disliked.

Some weeks after her arrival Mr. Skene, calling one evening rather late, had the door

opened to him by Sir Peter Cairne's ex-valet, and, for a moment, doubted if he saw aright.

'What are you doing here?' he ejaculated sternly.

'Lady Cairne recommended me, sir. I was with Sir Peter Cairne some years——'

'And no doubt robbed him *as you robbed Miss Bell!* I know all about that, Jaynes, and shall take care you have no opportunity of carrying on any similar games here.'

Jaynes was too utterly surprised to defend himself, and only rallied his forces as he saw his accuser about to mount the stairs, and knew if he did not speak at once it would be too late. In those few seconds Skene had also remembered that he could not make the man's real character known without confessing his knowledge of that theft which, to suit his own purpose, he had concealed from Millicent: so that he allowed himself to be detained.

'Don't be hard on me, sir. Give me another chance,' pleaded the man earnestly.

'That you may go and do the same thing again?'

'I'll not, sir; I swear it.'

'What guarantee have I that you would even keep an oath?'

'The best I can give you, sir, is—that *dishonesty has not paid.* I have made up my mind to live uprightly in future. You have seen something of me in Brighton, and there are others can tell you that, so far as *work* goes, I am always worth my wages.'

'You shall have one more trial. See you don't abuse the confidence I place in you,' said Mr. Skene, and turned to go. But Jaynes lifted his hand with a deprecatory gesture that attracted his attention. The man was too astute not to discern that for this leniency there must be some reason, and that probably there had been a motive, too,

for the silence which had been kept as to his former misdemeanour. Perhaps the free-masonry that there is amongst rogues told him that there were capabilities of villainy in him who now acted as judge which it only needed temptation to develop, and that some day they might stand on a par together.

'One moment, sir. If I can ever be of any service to you, you may count upon me. I should not stop at a trifle to prove my gratitude.'

A cunning gleam in his near-set eyes, and a faint conciliatory smile, showed that more lay in his words than their meaning actually expressed. Skene was not slow to perceive this, and a sudden revulsion of feeling made him momentarily regret that he had not at any risk got rid of such a scoundrel.

'Do your duty to your employer. That is all I ask of you,' he returned sharply, and passed on upstairs.

In the pretty dimly-lighted sitting-room he found Millicent alone, holding a book under a deeply-shaded lamp, trying to read. She looked up with a friendly smile, and did not resist when he drew the book gently from her hand.

'You are ruining your eyes. It is madness trying to read in this semi-darkness.'

'It will be pleasanter to talk,' she assented. This little bit of civility, being more encouragement than he had received before, elated him extremely, and caused him to lose the feeling of annoyance the interview with Jaynes had produced. Anything was preferable to the risk of forfeiting the favour so hardly won.

'I was surprised to find Jaynes installed,' he remarked presently, curious to know what she thought about it.

'He has been here more than a week. I wonder you have not seen him before.

Mrs. Messiter took him to please Nancy, I think.'

'I dare say Mrs. Messiter would do a great deal to oblige Lady Cairne.'

'She is very kind,' quickly.

'I knew she would be that. Yet you must marvel sometimes why I let you come here.'

'I was sure that you did not know all—or that I was exaggerating matters.'

Her simple faith in him caused the colour to rush to his forehead; he could not meet her eyes.

'It is years since I knew her before, and she has altered so. But if you are not happy, Millicent, you must leave. I have doubted more than once whether you should be allowed to remain.'

'Where else could I go?' sadly.

'To your sister, of course.'

She shook her head.

'Then for a short while, until we hear of

something else, go into lodgings. Let me arrange it for you ?'

'And how are the expenses to be paid ? I have not yet cleared off my debt to you.'

'You know that does not matter,' hastily.

'All the same, I prefer independence; though I thank you very much. And I am not absolutely unhappy ; it is only——'

'Only that you are utterly out of your element. Do you think I have not seen it all this time and suffered the more because, as a man, I am so powerless to help you. It is maddening that one can do nothing.'

He had risen from his seat and now walked over to the window, and stood with his back to her. For a moment she hesitated ; then she, too, rose, moving slowly to his side.

'You must not think it so bad as that. You did the best you could ; I am fortunate to be so well provided for : besides this, it is a comfort to know, as I *do* know, that if

it grew unendurable I have you to turn to for aid.'

'There is nothing I would not do for you,' he said earnestly.

'I know it,' she repeated in her sweet low voice.

And, indeed, it would have been hard for anyone to doubt his sincerity who saw him as he looked down at her, his gaze betraying an eager longing to be of use, while bitterly aware of his own impotence, and holding himself strongly in check lest any expression of the love he felt should escape him and only add to her distress.

All this Millicent saw, or thought she saw, in his face, and for one moment was afraid he might lose his self-control and say words that could not be forgotten, raising a barrier between them only to be bridged by an entire self-surrender, for which she was not yet prepared. That such a contingency should enter

her head, and not be dismissed as an impossibility, argued well for Mark Skene's hopes; but all the same it was an acute relief when he said quietly and with a tender protectiveness that might have come from a brother, or one who had no wish to be anything but a friend:

'You have been so brave hitherto, and patient, that I can ask you to be so a little longer. It won't be so hard, will it? now you know I am doing all I can to rescue you from a disagreeable position.'

She looked up gratefully, and could scarcely see through a mist of tears, or trust herself to speak, so keenly was she sensible of a crisis postponed—only postponed, she knew, and wondered how the question would be answered when put to her at last, and whether an affection founded on esteem that came reluctantly and by slow degrees were not better worth the having than more impulsive passion.

Mr. Skene abruptly changed the conversation.

'Your sister comes to see you sometimes, I suppose?'

'As often as she can. She is in a small whirl of gaiety already; but she never lets a day pass without seeing me or writing.'

'She is not spoilt by prosperity?'

'Not the least. She explains it herself by saying that, never having been as sweet as honey or as mild as milk, there is nothing in her nature to ferment or to turn sour.'

'You are very fond of her?' noting enviously the soft light that came into her eyes as she spoke.

'She is everything to me. No one knows how good she is, not even you.'

'She never liked me, I am sorry to say, so gave me no opportunity of judging her best qualities; and I was preoccupied, I suppose. Is not that Mrs. Messiter's voice, and someone with her?'

'It is Count D'Esterre,' said Millicent, her dislike to the person named very legibly written on her face when the door opened.

As she entered, Mrs. Messiter gave a quick glance from one to the other, before she shook hands with Mr. Skene and drew him into a discussion, which, although he entered into it with apparent spirit, did not prevent his being aware of what passed between the two other occupants of the room. He saw Millicent's proud lips curved in iciest disdain as the Count greeted her with easy familiarity and sank into a chair beside her, and knew she was only answering in monosyllables to the flowery speeches, fragments of which reached him in the intervals of Mrs. Messiter's voluble conversation.

His attention had been withdrawn for a while, when it was again attracted by a slight noise and the rustling of a skirt.

Millicent had risen, and, pale with anger,

was standing irresolutely, her fingers tightly clenched, her eyes flashing indignation. Her first impulse was evidently to join the others, and she had made a few steps in their direction, when some second thought altered her intention, and with a scornful movement she turned and swept from the room. Count D'Esterre also rose, and, coming forward languidly, made his adieux, as though there had been nothing unusual in his companion's sudden exit, ignoring with quiet unconcern the cold silence in which he was allowed to depart.

Mark Skene had enough manliness in him passionately to resent what he supposed was an insult to the woman he loved ; but his wrath was materially lessened by the reflection that the episode might have the salutary effect of driving her to him the sooner for protection, and therefore was not without its use.

Mrs. Messiter was also exceedingly vexed, and did not hesitate to show it.

'I hope, Mr. Skene, you were more successful before we came in, than the Count seems to have been now,' she remarked disagreeably, as the door closed, leaving them alone.

'I certainly used different tactics. I should think it was exceedingly bad policy—to call it nothing worse—mortally to offend the woman I hoped to win as wife.'

It was the first time he had declared his intentions, and he would not have done so now had he not been thrown off his balance by what had just occurred. Mrs. Messiter was staggered by the announcement; for, in spite of her suspicions, she never dreamed that it had gone so far, and, indeed, was justified in her surprise; as, since the very first time he had been at her house, it was to the widow he had made love, openly, shamelessly, if this were true.

'Count D'Esterre has no more thought of marrying her than *you* have,' she said sharply, trying to believe she had misunderstood his meaning.

'Not so much, I expect, since he has only known her a few weeks, and I have loved her for two years,' he returned coolly.

She caught her breath, and leant against the table to steady herself, not certain if she heard aright or were under the influence of some magic by which facts were distorted, and falsehood for an instant looked like truth. Only three days ago they had been alone in this very room, and he had talked to her of the old times when they were lovers, and said how hard it was to forget, while for a moment his hand had rested on the hair it had been his custom to caress. What wonder if she had hoped those relations might be renewed? But now they were alone again, and standing apart, while he told her that

even then it was Millicent Bell he loved! She had been an amusement only; despised, perhaps, because so lightly won, when never seriously sought.

Her bosom swelled, and her face was crimson with different emotions, one succeeding the other, and each growing in intensity, until at last she felt that she could bear anything but the knowledge that this man—the man she had loved all her life—did not *care*, and for the second time was passing out of her reach. She stretched out her hand to him with a little pitiful cry.

'Mark! you did not mean it. You are angry now, but when you consider you will see I was not to blame. The man shall not come to my house again. I promise anything you ask; only forgive, and tell me it was not true.'

'You are your own mistress; I have no control over your actions,' he said frigidly.

Though he now regretted that matters had been thus precipitated—as it would probably make his visits here impossible for the future—he was relieved at the same time to know that the awkward explanation was over, and would not have to be made in cold blood; nor was the idea unwelcome that he would certainly shine in Millicent's sight as her champion and defender. Whatever happened, he must stand to his colours now.

As he moved toward the door she followed, and caught him by the arm.

'You shall not go,' she cried wildly, 'until you tell me it is not true.'

'It is my dearest wish to make Miss Bell my wife,' trying to free himself from her grasp.

'And I have only been your tool. You made love to me to gain access to her,' in low, thrilled tones; then, as with a decisive jerk he escaped from her hold and she saw that he was going, she forgot pride and anger both,

in her fear that she was losing him for ever.

'She does not love you, Mark, and—*I do!*'

Low as were the words, they were so resonant with passion that they fell upon the silence like clarion notes. She herself was startled by their sound, and shrank back abashed, trembling like a leaf, not daring to raise her eyes.

As a gambler watches the fate of his last coin, so she felt now that she had staked her all, and in a minute must know the worst. Yet it seemed hours before any answer came, and when it did, she felt as if she had heard the words before, and they could strike her with no fresh pain.

'I would rather have her hate than the love of any other woman,' he declared with cruel distinctness, and not glancing at the shrinking figure, that quivered all through as from

the probing of an old wound, went from the room and down the stairs.

The tiny hall was empty, and having no coat or umbrella to find, he passed straight out.

To his surprise, he found Count D'Esterre still outside. He had been lighting a cigarette, and now was looking about for a hansom, just hailing one as Skene came up.

'Can I put you down anywhere?' he asked nonchalantly, as though there could be no question of ill-feeling between them.

'It is not likely you are going my way,' returned Skene shortly.

'The City is my destination. Let me give you a light.'

Then, as the act brought them into momentary contact, and at least into a simulation of friendliness, he added:

'I have a very good thing on just now. If you have a small sum lying idle you'd like to

double without any risk, I can put you in the way of doing it. Yes, it's after business hours, I know'—in response to a muttered half-heard objection—'but it is a private transaction as yet. To-morrow the public will be allowed in; only to-day we have it to ourselves. Will you come?'

The last remnant of Skene's righteous wrath died away, quenched at once by the desire of gain. He nodded his assent, his cigar being between his lips, and jumped in after the Count into the cab. The direction was given, and they were driven away together at a smart pace towards the City.

END OF VOL. II.

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